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WILLIAM ELISON

The Question of the Unconditioned

Jean-Luc Marion / University of Chicago

I

The question bringing us together concerns God, or more precisely, God *as such*, God *as God*.¹ It would be false to read this as a simple tautology, a different way of asking the question of God. Clearly, God is first at stake here from the philosophical point of view, inasmuch as philosophy can or could encompass such a question in its reach. This occurs when philosophy is unfolded as a philosophical theology, one that owes nothing (or at least claims to owe nothing) to the particular theology of a religion, thus in the end to a Revelation. No one has shown this strictly philosophical position of the question of God better than Feuerbach: “God *as God* (*Gott als Gott*), that is, as a non-finite, non-human, not materially determined, non-sensible being (*Wesen*) is only an object of thought” (*Gott als Gott*, d.h. als nicht endliches, nicht menschliches, nicht materiell bestimmtes, nicht sinnliches Wesen, ist nur Gegenstand des Denkens).² Hence, the issue is to say and think God as such, or, to translate Plato’s expression more literally: “οἷος τυγχάνει ο θεός ὢν” ([the] god just as he happens, just as he is) (*Republic* II, 379a), the god as such, such as he is, in his very way of appearing. Actually, to be even more precise, this expression does not yet concern what philosophy and its later metaphysical form understand by the *such as*, the *as*. Yet this transition from one to the other shows only that it remains the chief prerogative of philosophy to exercise such an *as*, and in increasingly more radical fashion. Let us quickly clarify this point, which will become essential for the question of an approach to God *as such*.

Philosophy begins and unfolds according to a radical conviction, or rather according to a decision, which is both clean and at times obscured by its own evidence: the thing appears, appears from itself (by itself), but it

¹ Translator’s note: Marion employs multiple French expressions in the text, such as *comme*, *comme tel*, *en tant que*, and *en tant que tel*, which unfortunately all translate to “as” or “as such.” He frequently treats these expressions as a noun; hence, *le en tant que* is “the as.”

² Ludwig Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christentums*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. W. Schuffenhauer (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1973), 5:79. See “God as God (*Gott als Gott*)—as solely thinkable being (*Wesen*), objectifiable for reason alone—is hence nothing other than reason objectified (*sich gegenständliche Vernunft*), and indeed by virtue of its essence (*Wesen*) the highest” (*ibid.*).

nevertheless does not appear as self, as itself. It does not appear from itself as itself because it can only appear by finding itself returned to what in it determines it more radically than its first appearance. Plato accordingly refers the thing to its appearance in its *ἰδέα*, Aristotle in its *εἶδος*, what we understand today by the *forma* or the *Wesen*, in short, according to its quiddity, that in the thing which can be defined by a discourse, from the most general to the most individual. Understood in this sense, the *as* envisions the individual *as* (its) essence. Or, according to Husserl's related formulation, at stake is "*the individual, but taken purely as (als) specific case of the essence, in the form of an in general (überhaupt) . . . about straight lines and angles in general (überhaupt) or 'as such' ('als solche')*."³ The process that exercises the *as* by raising the individual to its essence, by making it undergo an eidetic reduction, allows it to transform into its form, to transpose it into a topic of knowledge. Of course, between the Greeks and Husserl, a new term modified the referral of what appears to its essence. This term was established (if not introduced for the first time) by Descartes, (namely, the term of) the object. Henceforth, essence demarcates what of the appearing can be thematized with certainty, hence what can be constituted as a distinct and defined object, producible from what in it exclusively comes down to order and measure (to model and parameters), so that it might be produced and reproduced in actuality. The object stands out as thing "as arranged according to our knowledge" (*in ordine ad cognitionem nostram*), the thing stands out as object "only" (*tantum*) where order and measure can be found.⁴ In any case, and this remains here for us the central point, whether already as object or not yet, essence, determined by the *as*, manages to say the permanent truth about the thing, which its first appearing was not yet able to make available. Thus, what appears, or, to resume Plato's expression, this "occurring as it is," belongs henceforth to the realm of essences, essences that seize and determine things as what they are and could be, according to a priori limits and establishment.

Yet there is more. The *as* can certainly overdetermine and finally define things in their essences a priori. Things would then appear after this reduction. Yet it can also free topics for consciousness, even objects that would not appear before them and that would never appear as such. When, in

³ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas I*, §5, Hua I (The Hague: Springer, 1950), 18. In a sense, even Heidegger upholds this authority, certainly by radicalizing it in depth: "We call primordial the 'as (als)' of circumspect interpretation that understands (*hermeneueia*), the existential-hermeneutical 'as (als)' in distinction from the *apophantical* 'as (als)' of the statement" (*Sein und Zeit*, §33, 158, trans. Joan Stambaugh as *Being and Time* [New York: SUNY Press, 1996], 148).

⁴ René Descartes, *Regulae ad directionem ingenii* XII and IV, respectively, in *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: Vrin, 1964), X:418, 377–78, henceforth referred to as AT. See Regula II: "Circa illa tantum objecta oportet versari, ad quorum certam et indubitam cognitionem nostra ingenia videntur sufficere" (We should attend only to those objects of which our minds seem capable of having certain and indubitable cognition) (*ibid.*, X:362). *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 1:110.

book Γ of what we call the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle establishes “a science which considers being *as* being” (τὸ ὄν ὡς ὄν),⁵ at stake is not the essence of a particular being, which we could actually encounter in the appearing. Rather, each real being finds its essence (its εἶδος, as it happens) in its genre and thus in the regional science that encompasses it. However, the universal science that studies being *as* being (and the singular gives here decisive information) does not remove it from any of these beings, precisely because there are no beings in general, but always things that are from the outset qualified according to their respective essences: living, vegetative and animated, mobile and immobile, sensing and thinking, material and immaterial, accidental and essential, temporal and eternal; in short, rocks, plants, animals, humans, and gods. Yet in the entire appearing of the φύσις, there are no things that would appear as beings at first glance. Being only appears by a doubled *such as*, actually redoubling the first *as* of the eidetic reduction, as a grounded act that presupposes grounding acts (the [various] *as* of the first level, which lead individuals to their respective essences and genres). In short, here the science of the second degree, in other words, the establishment of the topic, is accomplished before that of the thing destined to become later its object, when this still anonymous science of being as being will take the modern name of *ontologia*. “There is some science, which studies a being insofar as it is a being; this is in as much as it is understood to have a certain common nature or degree of a nature, which inheres in some manner in corporeal and incorporeal things, God and creatures, and in every thing even so far as singular beings” (Est quadam scientia, quae contemplatur ens *quatenus ens est*, hoc est *in quantum communem* quandam intelligitur habere *naturam* vel naturae gradum, qui rebus corporeis et incorporeis, Deo et creaturis, omnibusque adeo et singulis entibus suo modo inest).⁶ While the first, eidetic reduction transformed the appearing thing into its essence by a first *as*, this second reduction, which we will call “ontological” for convenience sake, gives rise to what it alone makes visible, namely, being. It does so without any appearing conferring a theme on it, even less a preliminary thing. Nothing is as much as (is) being *as* being, because the power of second degree of the *as* inscribes it alone into pure beingness. But no one has ever seen being as being appear in the φύσις, because the appearing first appears in its essence (with its generic *as*) and even more *before* being (according to its universal *as*). Things are, but they are not beings (even less than they are directly their essences). In the same way as they are

⁵ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Γ 1, 103a, 21, 37.

⁶ Johann Clauberg, *Ontosophia* §1, *Opera omnia philosophica* (Amsterdam: P. & I. Blaev, 1691; Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1968), 1:283. Citation is to the Olms edition. The abstraction of the *in quantum ens* is marked clearly by its indifference to the list of essences that it covers, essences that are themselves indifferent in their own way to the individuals that they define. [Translator's note: the translations from the Latin here and in the case of Suarez below were provided by my colleague Andrew LaZella.]

according to their essences only by the *as* of an eidetic reduction, so they are only beings by the *as* that makes them appear (or rather maybe *disappear*) according to the being *as* beings.

Thus, the universal a priori of the beingness of phenomena is deployed by virtue of the power of the *as* that is immediately doubled. These phenomena find their final articulation in being, in other words, far from their appearing itself. It remains for modernity solely to radicalize the theme of beingness into the objectness of the phenomenon so that the a priori might mark out the reign of the *as* in philosophy. When one evokes the least *as such* in philosophy and when one wants to submit the least phenomenon to it, one is already subject to the power of such a metaphysical *as*. Or, in other words, an *as* radically defines the metaphysical essence of philosophy, even if it does not erase all the possibilities of appearing within it. Having reached this decisive point, albeit in a quick and summary fashion, we can now go back to the question that brings us together—the question of thinking God *as such*, God *as* God. The first formulation of the question is immediately clarified and doubled by another: since the philosophical *as* always establishes an a priori, which precedes and determines the conditions of appearing of any thing it takes as theme (indeed as object), can the two a priori that we have seen emerge, that of essence and that of beingness, be suitable for what we call—at this moment without precaution—God? Can we consider God *as* essence and *as* being, in the question that inquires after God *as* God? Could we self-evidently assume what Heidegger himself admits in a decisive phrase: “Denn auch der Gott ist, wenn er ist, ein Seiender, steht als Seiender im Seyn und dessen Wesen, das sich aus dem Welten von Welt ereignet” (For even [the] God, if he is, is a being, holds himself *as* being in Being and in its essence, which comes from the worlding of the world)?⁷ Can we take up this *as* for thinking God *as* God, or do we not rather need another? At the very least, must we not renounce raising this question in regard to God (raising it or receiving it?) according to an *as* of whatever sort?

II

The failure in principle of any proof of the existence of God is the best confirmation that it is equally illegitimate in principle to speak of God *as such*. This failure is even more exemplary in that it is equally obvious whether the proof fails or whether it succeeds in attaining its goal. Hegel warns that in both cases it is a matter of knowing whether “God would be sufficiently rich to contain in himself a determination as poor as that of *being*, which is at the same time the most universal and the most abstract.”

⁷ Martin Heidegger, “Die Kehre, Einblick in das was ist” (Bremen Conference), in *Gesamtausgabe* 79 (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1994), 76. The *Gesamtausgabe* is henceforth referred to as *GA*.

For, if it is true that “nothing has a thinner content than being,”⁸ then to succeed in showing that this being is included in the concept of God raises a difficulty about the divinity of this concept, a difficulty that is at least as serious as the one that would exclude him from existence. The proof of the existence of God does presuppose that existence by right and first and foremost belongs to God, that is to say, that God as such would have to be understood as an existing being, where, what amounts to the same thing, to understand God as an existing being comes down to understanding him as such. For by what right do we know that the *as such*, which allows considering any phenomenon as being, remains valid in the case of God? How do we know that it would have some qualification whatever it *might be* to say whatever (it *might be*) about the divine, even less about God? And besides, such pretense only manages to impose itself very belatedly, when Suarez asserts without doubt for the first time that “the appropriate object for this science [i.e., metaphysics, that is to say, the science of *being as being*] must comprehend God and the other immaterial substances.”⁹ And indeed it is not only here a matter of the *as such* of the a priori of a being as being, but also, at the same time, of the a priori of an essence (of an εἶδος), that of an immaterial substance (*substantia immaterialis*). Suarez does not doubt for a moment that “the principles of metaphysics must be adapted and relate to reinforcing theological truths” and that hence the *as being* in the final analysis applies to God.¹⁰ The “strongest blow against God,” even before reducing him to the derivative rank of “supreme value” (as Heidegger radicalizes it), could hence already be accomplished in his submission to the

⁸ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*, §51, Remark.

⁹ Francisco Suarez, *Disputationes Metaphysicae*, I.1.26 (Paris: Vives, 1866), 25:11.

¹⁰ Ibid., *Ad lectorem*, I. See “Cum enim inter disputandum de divinis mysteriis haec metaphysica dogmata occurrerent, sine quorum cognitione et intellegentia vix, aut ne vix quidem, possunt altiora illa mysteria pro dignitate tractari, cogebar saepe, aut divinis et supernaturalibus rebus inferiores quaestiones admiscere, quod legentibus ingratum est et parum utile; aut certe, ut incommodum vitarem, in hujusmodi rebus sententiam meam breviter proponere, et quasi nudam fidem in eis legentibus postulare.” (Indeed when I admit disputing about divine mysteries these metaphysical dogmas arise, without cognition or understanding of which those higher mysteries can be treated scarcely, or not even scarcely, with dignity, I often was compelled, either to join divine and supernatural matters with inferior questions, which is unrewarding for the readers and of little use; or certainly, an inconvenience I would avoid, to display briefly my opinions on such matters, as if to claim bare faith in those readers.) What does this “unrewarding . . . and of little use” mean that causes this application of the metaphysical a priori to the “supernatural” question of God? Our entire questioning consists in precisely this question. Be that as it may, Suarez writes the *Disputationes Metaphysicae* for a single reason, which constitutes the entire problem: “Ita enim haec principia et veritates metaphysicae cum theologicis conclusionibus et discursibus cohaerent, ut si illarum scientia ac perfecta cognitio auferatur, horum etiam scientiam nimium labefactari necesse est” (Thus indeed these principles and truths of metaphysics agree with theological conclusions and discussions, such that if the knowledge and perfect cognition of the former were removed, a great deal of knowledge of the latter also must be destroyed) (ibid., *Proemium*, 1). This presupposes explicitly that the (revealed) theological conclusions follow from the (nonrevealed) metaphysical principle. One cannot be clearer.

questioning that investigates whether he must be understood as a being, albeit supreme.¹¹

Kant's criticism of the ontological argument offers the perfect paradigm for how radically inappropriate it is to apply the *as* to God. More exactly, it shows the impropriety of the ontico-ontological a priori that it exercises. For, in accordance with a remark by Bruaire, it is true that "the 'refutation' of the ontological proof is the true key to the entire [First] *Critique*."¹² Since 1963, *The Only Possible Foundation of a Demonstration of the Existence of God* takes on and applies the metaphysical determination of "the very simply and fully comprehensible concept of existence (*Dasein*)," a concept of which "one cannot say anything further to develop it," because it amounts to a "concept of position (*Position der Setzung*)."¹³ Such a position says nothing and gives nothing to think; it lays down and lays out what is said and thought. We really have here the poorest and the most abstract concept, since it is actually not even a matter of a real concept (concerned with a thing), but of a modality of the object of the concept. This modality concerns not a relation between a concept (as property of an object) to another concept, but of a concept to an object, toward the spirit that knows it. As a celebrated *Reflection* will say: "For the predicate of existence (*Dasein*) I do not add anything to the thing, if not the thing itself to a concept. In an existential proposition, I hence do not leave the concept in order to go toward a predicate different from the one that had been thought in the concept, but I leave it in order to go toward the thing itself with exactly the same predicates, neither more nor less, in such a manner alone that not only the relative position but also the absolute position is thought (*complementum possibilitatis*)."¹⁴ Focusing this doctrine of being *as* being on the case of God *as such*, the *Critique of Pure Reason* first repeats only the thesis of being as thesis: "Being is obviously not a real predicate; that is, it is not a concept of something which could be added to the concept of a thing. It is merely the positing (*bloß die Position*) of a thing, or of certain determinations, as existing in themselves."¹⁵ It then literally applies to the case of God: while the concept of omnipotence really adds a predicate to the concept of God (and two concepts

¹¹ Heidegger, "Nietzsches Wort 'Gott ist tot,'" *Holzwege*, in GA, 5 (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1977), 260; emphasis added.

¹² Claude Bruaire, *Le droit de Dieu* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1974), 32.

¹³ Immanuel Kant, *The Only Possible Foundation of a Demonstration of the Existence of God*, respectively: *First Consideration*, then I, §2, in *Akademie Ausgabe* (Berlin: Königlich Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, n.d.), 2:70, 73. *Akademie Ausgabe* is henceforth referred to as AA.

¹⁴ Kant, *Reflexionen zur Metaphysik*, §6276, in AA, 18:543. The *Critique of Judgment* in §76 also distinguishes "the position (*Position*) of representation of a thing relative to our concept and in general to the power of thinking" (which defines the possibility), of "the positioning (*Setzung*) of the thing in itself (outside of the concept)," which characterizes effectiveness (AA, 5:402). Also: "The knowledge of existence (*Existenz*) of the object consists in the fact that it is posited (*gesetzt*) outside of thought itself" (A639/B667).

¹⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A598/B626; translated by Norman Kemp Smith as *Critique of Pure Reason* (London: Macmillan, 1978). Heidegger has noted correctly that these "determinations" go back to the categories of the modality of being ("Kants These über

result from this predication), the concept of the “little word *is*” does not add any real predicate to the concept of God (and only the one original concept remains). If I say “*God is*, or rather ‘There is a God,’ we attach no new predicate to the concept of God, but only posit the subject itself with all its predicates, and indeed posit it as being an *object* that stands in relation to my *concept*.”¹⁶ It is hence shown to be impossible to deduce the existence of God (which has nothing of a real predicate) from his essence (from his real predicates) by pure logic and without any recourse to experience.

Kant admits (or declares) that the same *as* could be applied in the case of God as much as in any other case, in the infamous argument of the hundred dollars: a hundred actual dollars hold no more perfection (of monetary value) than a hundred possible dollars, which are owned potentially. Whether I own them or not, these hundred dollars correspond to the same concept. The worth of this concept depends on exchange rates, on inflation, on the prize of commodities, and so forth, all very real measures. Yet this comparison, despite or even because of its evidence, shows the weakness of the critique of the ontological argument. It does so in a twofold fashion.

First, one can and must object that a hundred actual dollars (actually owned, because actually in my wallet, in the form of clinking and clanking coins, real bank bills on valid paper or as a signed check ready for deposit, etc.) do not have the same predicable reality as a hundred possible dollars (dreamed, hoped, expected at the end of the month, etc.) but much more. This is so for a reason Kant himself taught us: dollars are real only because

das Sein,” *Wegmarken*, in *GA*, 9 [Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1976], 467ff. commenting remarkably on the *Critique of Judgment*, §76 [see n. 14] starting from A219/B266). This is also confirmed explicitly by the remark that “the real contains no more than the merely possible” (A599/B627).

¹⁶ Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A599/B627. This thesis takes up again, without doubt knowingly, one of Hume’s theses: “The idea of existence, then, is the very same with the idea of what we conceive to be existent. . . . That idea conjoin’d with the idea of any object, makes no addition to it” (*A Treatise of Human Nature*, I.2, §6, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge [Oxford: Clarendon, 1978], 66–67); and, without knowing it, an objection Gassendi already raised against Descartes’s argument: “Sed nimirum, neque in Deo, neque in alia ulla re existentia perfectio est, sed id, sine quo non sunt perfectiones” (In fact, however, existence is not a perfection either in God or in anything else; it is that without which no perfections can be present) (Fifth Objections, in *AT*, VII:323; *Philosophical Writings*, 2:224). Descartes will assert the opposite without any hesitation: “Hic non video cujus generis rerum velis esse existentiam, neque quare non aequae proprietates atque omnipotentia dici possit, sumendo scilicet nomen proprietatis pro quolibet attributo, sive pro omni eo quod de re potest praedicari, ut hic omnino sumi debet. Quin etiam existentia necessaria est revera in Deo proprietates strictissimo modo sumpta, quia illi soli competit, et in eo solo essentiae partem facit” (Here I do not see what sort of thing you want existence to be, nor why it cannot be said to be a property just like omnipotence—provided, of course, that we take the word “property” to stand for *any attribute, or for whatever can be predicated of a thing*; and this is exactly how it should be taken in this context. Moreover in the case of God necessary existence is in fact a property in the strictest sense of the term, since it applies to him alone and forms a part of his essence as it does of no other thing) (*ibid.*, Replies, 382–83; *Philosophical Writings*, 2:262–63; emphasis added). The question is less about defining existence as a real predicate or not, but as a predicate or not; and, in the case of God, existence becomes a real predicate, for, without him, the subject of predication could not be described as a divine res.

they are given intuitively in space and time; as pure concept, they do not reach existence. In space, precisely, they can leave my possession and move around in order to end up being put in a bank account. In time, exactly, invested with an annual rate of 3, 5, or 10 percent, they will by the end of the year become as counted and calculated res no longer a hundred dollars but 103, 105, or 110 dollars, following the conditions agreed upon by the bankers. This is not a matter of sophisms, nor of embezzlement, nor of a miracle, but the outcomes of the actual banking system, results (in this case of cash) that are directly linked to the position of the dollars in their defined temporal existence, through the interest of any monetary loan. This interest results from the temporalization of the object of experience having become actual. For due to the banking system, over time (for the limit of a year), the hundred dollars will have become 103, 105, or 110 because, more fundamentally, it perfectly verifies the Kantian definition of existence as position, that is to say, "the existence of things outside me, as the condition of the time-determination."¹⁷ In this sense, the example Kant chose in order to explain that being is not a real predicate proves on the contrary that the position itself implies a growth in the reality of the concept, from the fact of the temporality of existence. Does not Kant himself propose that existence adds something to the thing from the outside, when he ends the critique of the ideal of pure reason by stressing the fact that "the knowledge of the *existence* of the object consists precisely in the fact that the object is posited in itself, *outside of thought* (*außer dem Gedanken an sich selbst gesetzt*)"?¹⁸ Is not such an exteriority of the position added to, and does it not complete thought itself? And what would an unreal complement, an unreal addition mean here? The Kantian critique of the ontological argument can hence be criticized first following Kant's own definition of existence outside of thought.

One can also address a second objection to this critique: even by disregarding the first objection about existence, one would still have to allow that existence would apply to all beings, finite (in the case of a hundred dollars) as much as infinite (God). Yet, this obvious univocity is never even mentioned by Kant, much less justified. It appears all the more problematic as here the univocal thesis of the irreducible distinction between concept and existence results not only from finite beings in general, but even from a very particular sort of finite being: money, which as the substitute of any possible being, enjoys an abstract universality, which also excludes it from having the rank of a being in the *real* sense. Yet would not this ambiguous privilege rather forbid the hundred dollars to serve as a paradigm not only for finite physical beings, but even more so for God, who remains by definition the *ens realissimum*? And if there is only an implicit analogy at stake, must we not also wonder about

¹⁷ Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, "Refutation of Idealism," B276. At stake is "the ability to determine (*Bestimmbarkeit*) my existence (*Dasein*) only in relation to my representations in time" (*ibid.*, "Refutation of Mendelssohn's Proof of the Permanence of the Soul," B420).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, A639/B667.

this analogy overturning the habitual order, which refers the finite analogues to the first infinite analogue, by instead displacing the dignity of the first analogue God here with the finite? The puzzle is hidden here by the fact that Kant, although such a great thinker of finitude, is blind to the difference between finite and infinite, which is even greater than the difference between concept and existence. By contrast, Hegel sees it very clearly: “Although there might indeed be some justice [in saying] that the concept differs from being, God differs even more from a hundred dollars and from other finite things. It is the *definition of finite things*, that concept and being are different in them, that concept and reality, soul and body, can be separated, and hence also be perishable and mortal; on the contrary, [even] the abstract definition of God is really only his concept and his being.”¹⁹ One even would have to turn Kant’s refutation upside down: far from existence adding nothing real to the concept of the essence of God, it actually defines his essence, for the same reason as do the other real predicates (infinity, goodness, omnipotence, omniscience, etc.), since if the concept of the essence of God does not include his necessary existence, we would have not a concept of a nonexistent God (which is, moreover, a contradiction in terms), but the concept of a non-God—who would be also and consequently nonexistent. Besides, on this issue, one would be limited to repeating Descartes’s replies to his already Kantian objectors. For the accusation of sophism (confusing concept and existence) itself hinges on a *sophismatis* species—an illusion in the form of a sophism, a mere appearance of argument, namely that of believing that one can think God as nonexistent (“facile mihi persuadeo, illam [sc. existentiam] etiam ab essentia Dei sejungi posse, atque ita Deum ut non existentem cogitari possit” [I find it easy to persuade myself that existence can also be separated from the essence of God, and hence that God can be thought of as not existing]). Yet it is enough to look here more closely (“tamen diligentius attendenti” [when I concentrate more carefully]), to see that it is no less contradictory to think God (the supremely perfect being) lacking existence (that is to say, a perfection) than to think an uphill without a downhill (slope).²⁰ But a truly “attentive” consideration must go against “habit,”²¹ which distin-

¹⁹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, I, 1.1, ed G. Lasson (Hamburg: F. Meiner, 1934), 1:75 (see also II, 2.1, 2:102 and 105). See the parallel in Hegel’s *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*: “But after all, it is well to remember, when we speak of God, that we have an object of another kind than any hundred sovereigns, and unlike any one particular notion, representation, or however else it may be styled. It is in fact this and this alone which marks everything finite: its being in time and space is discrepant from its notion. God, on the contrary, expressly has to be what can only be ‘thought as existing’; his notion involves being” (§51, Remark):

²⁰ René Descartes, *Meditatio V*, VII:66; *Philosophical Writings*, 2:46.

²¹ “Cum assuetus sim in omnibus aliis rebus existentiam ab essentia distinguere, facile mihi persuadeo illam etiam ab essentia Dei sejungi posse” (Since I have been *accustomed* to distinguish between existence and essence in everything else, I find it easy to persuade myself that existence can also be separated from the essence of God) (ibid.). See “*sumus tam assueti in reliquis omnibus existentiam ab essentia distinguere, ut non satis advertamus quo pacto ad*

guishes everywhere else what one above all must not distinguish—in the sole case of God: “*nullius alterius ideam apud se inveniri, in qua eodem modo necessarium existentiam contineri*” (it [the mind] cannot find within itself an idea of any other thing such that necessary existence is seen to be contained in the idea in this way).²² Hence, Descartes and Hegel make clear what Kant does not see or cannot admit: no thesis about being, not even the thesis of being as thesis (*Setzung*), can be applied univocally to finite beings and to God. Thus, by good logic, Kant shows only one thing: not that the ontological argument does not a priori prove the existence of God, but, precisely the opposite, that one cannot prove a priori the existence of any finite being starting from its concept or its essence. Still, Kant shows that existence is not included like a (real) predicate in the concept of any finite object, and that, in the case of God, one must suspend the reply to other considerations, a case that is not here examined as such. In short, let us conclude that the ontological argument never concludes (anything), except maybe in the case of God. Indeed, the case of God remains an exception by definition: his essence, if he has one, could not be summarized in a concept homogenous to that of finite objects, that is to say, one could not in principle exclude his existence from his essence. In taking up again a formula that is literally Thomist “*Deus est suum esse*” (God is his own existence),²³ Descartes criticizes the Kantian critique of the ontological argument in advance, on behalf of its absolutely unquestioned and completely problematic ontico-ontological equivocality.

III

These two objections, however, do not get to the heart of the legitimate and even essential Kantian critique of the ontological argument. They are actually still limited to contesting the logical validity of showing that the argument is supposedly logically invalid, without getting to its a priori presupposition, namely the a priori of a definition of God *as such*. Basically, the question does not consist in deciding whether God exists or does not exist a priori accord-

essentiam Dei potius quam aliarum rerum pertineat” (*We are so accustomed to distinguishing existence from essence in the case of all other things that we fail to notice how closely existence belongs to essence in the case of God as compared with that of other things*) (First Replies, in AT, VII:116; 2:83; emphasis added). See also *Principia Philosophiae*, I, §16: “*assueti reliquis omnibus in rebus essentiam ab existentiam distinguere*” (*we have got into the habit of distinguishing essence from existence in the case of all other things*) (AT, VIII-1:10; 1:198; emphasis added).

²² Descartes, *Principia Philosophiae*, I, §15, in AT, 10; 1:198. See “*summum ens esse, sive Deum, ad cuius solius essentiam existentia pertinere*” (the supreme being exists, or that God, to whose essence alone existence belongs, exists) (Meditatio V, AT, VII:69; 2:47).

²³ Descartes, Fifth Replies, in AT, VII:383; 2:263. Descartes wants not only to say that there is no mountain without valley (to which one could after all object that there are canyons in the middle of a plateau), but that there is no upward slope without a downward slope, since they are the same identical slope.

ing to his essence (theology and faith can do perfectly well without such proof). Instead, it is about deciding whether there is only one single manner of existing and a single concept of being, and especially whether God must submit to this ontico-ontological univocity, indeed whether God even has to be.

Kant (but really all of modern metaphysics with him, without the gap between theism and atheism here making any notable difference) never seems to hear this question. Otherwise, he should have concluded the critique of the ideal of pure reason as he concluded that of the paralogisms of pure reason: just as the concepts (or categories) of substance, of simplicity, of personality and of ideality cannot in principle be applied to the *I*, since it “is as little an intuition as it is a concept of any object; it is the mere form of consciousness, which can accompany the two kinds of representation,”²⁴ so the concepts of existence and the thesis of the position, which are only operative in the frame of sensible intuition, have no pertinence in the case of God, who neither exists nor does not exist, has no obligation one way or the other. Or rather, he should have concluded the critique of the ideal of pure reason as he concluded that of the antinomies of pure reason: just as the concepts of beginning, of simple parts, of freedom and of causality can only be valid for empirically determined phenomena and cannot be applied to “the cosmical idea [that] is either too large or too small for the empirical regress, and therefore for any possible concept of the understanding”²⁵ in the same way, once again, the concepts of existence and the thesis of position, which are only valid within the frame of sensible intuition, have no pertinence in regard to God, who is not required to exist or not to exist because he does not have to arise in intuition. Or to say it with Jean-Luc Nancy, “The Christian ‘God,’ to the extent that one can call him that, is not posited, not even self-positing. He has no ground, no place for that: he has no world, no other-world, but an opening of meaning which lays out the spatiality of the world in regard to him.”²⁶ If existence as position is not imposed in the name of the given requirements of sensible intuition, then it has no pertinence at all, no validity and no a priori right in the question of God, which is raised only outside of sensible intuition. Hence, one cannot conclude from the critique of the proofs of God’s existence, and especially of the ontological proof, that one cannot demonstrate the existence of God, but rather that one may not, especially that one should not attempt it here, since God is not required to

²⁴ Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A382.

²⁵ Ibid., A489/B517.

²⁶ Jean-Luc Nancy, *L’adoration (Déconstruction du christianisme 2)* (Paris: Galilée, 2010), 47. And one can compare the case of God to that of the world: “The non-position of God is also the non-position of the world or of being in general; the world is not posited, it is given, given from nothing and for nothing” (ibid.).

exist according to this definition of existence. The position of God in existence (or as existing) appears rather as the perfect example of a meaningless proposition, according to the terms of Kant's investigation. The question of God is only raised in a rational sense if it is not found straightaway subjugated to some sort of a priori, which would pretend to reach God *as such*.

Kant neither saw nor said that God is only posited rationally as a question by freeing himself from any a priori. Even so, there is at least one instance where he reaches a quasi-formulation of this requirement without recognizing it. In fact, in order to confirm the thesis of being as position, he adds a different and equally ambiguous argument, after the (unfortunate) argument about the hundred dollars. It is an argument from absurdity: if existence were to constitute a real predicate, then my concept of an object (in itself, thought as possible) would never remain adequate to the (real) truth of this object, because such a real object would encompass a greater reality than that of a nonreal object, even the same one (even one with the same essence). In short, no *adequatio rei et intellectus* would remain, because the existence of the *res* would in reality surpass its simple concept or *intellectus rei*. "By whatever and by however many predicates we may think a thing—even if we completely determine it—we do not make the least addition to the thing when we further declare that this thing *is*. Otherwise, it would *not be exactly the same thing that exists, but something more* than we had thought in the concept (*nicht eben dasselbe, sondern mehr existieren, als ich im Begriffe gedacht hatte*), and we could not, therefore, say that the exact object of my concept exists."²⁷ From the Kantian point of view, this argument from absurdity can hold sufficiently clearly for the knowledge of objects of experience, that is to say, for finite beings: adequation indeed implies that the existence of the known does not surpass or unbalance the adequation with its knowledge in the con-

²⁷ Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A600/B628 (emphasis added). This formulation is not isolated, since one finds it several times in the *Lessons on Rational Theology*. "But, from the fact that a thing is, it does not become more accomplished in and for itself; it does not receive any new predicate, but is rather found posited (*gesetzt*) with all its predicates. The thing is found in my concept, such that I think it as simply possible, already as complete as it is later, once become actual; if not it would be no longer the same thing than the one I had thought, but *it would exist more than was found in the concept of the object (sondern es würde mehr existieren, als in dem Begriff vom Gegenstand lag)*, if existence were a particular reality in things. Being is hence obviously not a real predicate, that is to say the concept of anything which would come to be added to the outside of the thing in order to render it more accomplished" (Immanuel Kant, *Religionslehre Pöltz*, in AA, 28:2/2, 1027). And further on, in regard to the argument of the 100 dollars: "Thus, in the case where this [actual dollars], i.e. the object, would contain *more (mehr)* than that [possible dollars], i.e. the concept, my concept would not express (*nicht . . . ausdrücken*) the entire object and would also not be its adequate concept" (ibid., 1028). In another place: "The thing was in my concept, when I think it as purely and simply possible, already as accomplished (*vollständig*) as it would be later, when it becomes actual; if not it would then not be the same that I had thought, but *more would exist than was found in the concept of the object (sondern es würde mehr existieren, als in dem Begriff vom Gegenstand lag)*, if existence were a particular reality in the thing" (*Natürliche Theologie Volckman*, ibid., 1176; emphases added).

cept. But what happens to it in the case of God? How absurd would it be to observe that in *this* case, not only is there more in the actual thing than in its concept, but this excess does not contradict the adequate knowledge of *this* thing, since it is a matter of knowing what, by definition and by hypothesis, must surpass any content possible to formulate conceptually? Even more, by putting forward the strange formulation that “there would exist *not just the same but much more* than I had thought in the concept” (*nicht eben dasselbe, sondern mehr existieren, als ich im Begriffe gedacht hatte*) as an absurdity, Kant literally recovers the expression that St. Anselm had privileged in order to envisage God’s unconditioned positivity rationally. “Ergo Domine non solum es quo majus cogitari nequit, sed es quiddam *majus quam cogitari possit*. Quoniam namque valet cogitari esse aliquid hujusmodi: si tu non es hoc ipsum, potest cogitari aliquid majus te; quod fieri nequit” (Therefore, Lord, not only are You that than which a greater cannot be thought, but You are also something *greater than can be thought*. For since it is possible to think that there is such a one, then, if You are not this same being something greater than You could be thought—which cannot be).²⁸ This is certainly the same formula—thinking what is unable not to surpass the greatness my thoughts attribute to it—but understood in two opposing ways. For Kant, what is thought (*in intellectu*) must be able to remain equal, hence adequate to the thing really existing (*in re*), even in the case of God, who is no exception to the rule of *adequatio*. Yet as, in this case, one must admit that an existing God would surpass the concept of a (non-)God who is only in thought, one must renounce God in order not to allow this *mehr existieren als im Begriffe*. For St. Anselm, on the contrary, what remains only thought without also being real (*in re*) would be less (great or good) than what would be both thought and actual. Hence, it could not refer to God, who would in this case remain less than himself: God must stand out as *majus quam cogitari possit*. Thus, in order for God to reach an essence suitable to his dignity, he must surpass the simple thought of this essence through the fact of his existence, which nevertheless remains unrepresentable in thought. God is only God by transgressing his own concept (his thinkable essence) precisely through his existence. What is such that nothing greater (no essence) can be thought, would only be thus, if it were to appear greater than anything that can be thought by a concept. Kant thus recovers in the form of an objection what St. Anselm discovered as a solution to the question of God: God is opened to the question when he surpasses

²⁸ St. Anselm, *Proslogion*, XV, trans. M. J. Charlesworth (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1979); emphasis added. Between St. Anselm and Kant, Descartes offers here a shift: “me istam vim concipiendi *majorem numerum esse cogitabilem quam a me unquam possit cogitari*, non a me ipso, sed ab aliquo ente me perfectiore accipisse” (I have the power of conceiving that there is a *thinkable number which is larger than any number that I can ever think of*, and hence that this power is something which I have received not from myself but from some other being which is more perfect than I am) (Descartes, Second Replies, in AT, VII, 139; 2:100; emphasis added).

the limits of the thinkable, that is to say, the metaphysical a priori that pretends to think him *as such*.

IV

Hence, this position, which makes us think according to the *as*, cannot think the unconditioned, but solely what it conditions. It thus cannot think God, since it thinks him according to his *as*, inevitably demanding an a priori excess and transcendentality toward what it imagines as God and whose unconditionality it contradicts all the same in principle. To claim to think God *as such* hence constitutes a performative contradiction, since, if there were anything here of God albeit as hypothesis, he would not be able to evade any a priori other than himself. However odd this conclusion might appear, it is necessary: the *as such* leads to a transcendental idolatry—submitting God to the conditions of the possibility of experience, such as a finite spirit like ours, would define it a priori. To posit as supreme principle the synthetic a priori judgments that the “conditions of the possibility of experience in general are at the same time (*zugleich*) the conditions of the possibility of the objects of experience”²⁹ is valid precisely only for objects and does not concern God, except if, precisely, one assumes him to be an object submitted to the transcendental conditions of our experience in general. But a God reduced to being an object becomes, by hypothesis and by definition, a non-God. An exodus is thus required: either to release the question of God from the finite territory of our experience and its a priori conditions, or, what amounts to the same, to release us instead from this waymarked, enclosed, and predetermined territory, which the transcendental attitude secures for us by enclosing us in it. This duty of exodus requires suspending this attitude in the case of God, not in order to reach him (who will undoubtedly always remain inaccessible), but in order at least to keep the question open. A duty of exodus that also imposes the paradox that, if by any chance an experience of this question were to remain possible, it would only be able to happen outside of the field of the conditions of the possibility of experience. Yet at least in its metaphysical state, philosophy cannot envision this paradox or this exodus. Either it denies absolutely that a nonobject would be able to show itself outside the a priori conditions of experience without yielding to an *as such*, or it thinks that it has made great progress in the critique of reason (or rather, in order to speak its language, in the critique of any possible revelation from the point of view of simple reason), when it claims to be purified of any anthropomorphism. Under the title of anthropomorphism, metaphysics denounces the use of definitions drawn from the sensible world, from the imaginations of poets and from human passions in order to describe the essence of God. Yet it only denounces them in order to

²⁹ Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A158/B197 [translation modified].

substitute for them more formal, universal, and a priori concepts, without which its own transcendental posture would become untenable, and in order to reestablish an anthropomorphism of the second degree, which claims to think God as principle, supreme being, final truth, moral author of the world, value of values, even future man, and so forth. Feuerbach allowed this to the point of making it his basic teaching, by attributing simply to theology what is valid only for the metaphysical interpretation of theology: "the *secret of theology* is *anthropology*."³⁰ That these idols of a second degree could also lead to such a non-God does not change anything in the matter: conceptual atheism repeats the transcendental idolatry and consecrates it even all the more that it makes it play in the void, in the absence of any "God," an empty scene where only his mere appearance still explodes in full light.

What path unfolds for such an exodus? Let me point out, however, that an exodus does not follow a path that is already traced and known before departing, but, on the contrary, the path follows the beginning movements of the exodus, which alone can open it. The path does not precede the exodus, but follows it. It emerges in accordance with the progress made, if one turns around each step of the way one has covered, and thus it is seen only retrospectively. Let us hence proceed step-by-step. We must leave the position that fixes and freezes experience in objects by exercising the *as*. And since one shuts off any access to God by claiming to aim at him *as such*, it will be advisable to approach God always *quoad nos*, regarding us, relative to us, according to our finitude, which forbids us to claim to approach God as such, absolutely. Yet how should we understand this *quoad nos*, this "regarding us"? Does not such an approach relative to us precisely define the critical enterprise itself, which unfolds its a priori only in relation to ourselves? Furthermore, does not this *quoad nos* characterize even more exactly the categories

³⁰ Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christentums*, preface, 6. And the most patent anthropomorphism is accomplished precisely in the highest definition of God, that of modern metaphysics: "Among all the definitions that the understanding or reason confer on God in religion [not: in modern metaphysics, Kant's critique!] and especially in the Christian [religion], the one that carries the day is the one in which as much as it distinguishes God from the human, still expresses at the same time an essential relation with the human. This definition is that of *moral perfection*. God is an object for religion *as (als)* morally perfect being (*Wesen*)" (ibid., 93f). Besides, two texts confirm immediately that the reference is in fact to Kant. A variant: "but [God] is nothing than the realized idea, the accomplished (personalized) law of morality, the human moral essence (*Wesen*) posited *as (als)* absolute essence—the properly human essence; thus the moral God imposes on humans the requirement to be as he is himself." Then a note: "Kant himself has already said that, in his *Lessons on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*, held under Frederick II and already often cited (135): 'God is equally the moral law itself, but thought as personalized'" (ibid., 95). On Nietzsche's nonidolatrous interpretation of this thesis, which really aims at Kant (and not at "religion"), see my study *Idol and Distance* (Paris: Grasset, 1977), 55ff., which cites "Question: Is this pantheistic position of 'yes' to all things really rendered impossible at the same time as the moral [God]? At bottom, only the moral God has been overcome—*Im Grunde ist nur der moralische Gott überwunden*" (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente*, 5, §7, in *Nietzsches Werke*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari [Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999], VIII/1:217).

of modality, and those of possibility and of existence, which actually describe neither the object itself (as do those of quantity and of quality) nor the relations among real objects (as do those of substance and accidents, of cause and effect, and of the community of substances), but which “express the relation to the faculty of knowing”?³¹ In this case, to invoke the *quoad nos*, “regarding us,” makes us regress into the *as such* we wanted to leave, and we would have sunk further into aporia. All the same, here as is so often the case, the opening arrives as the aporia increases. What are actually the stakes between the *quoad nos* critique and the principles of modality? Let me repeat one more time that it is a matter of establishing that the relationship between the object and the faculty of knowing is determined by its possibility (whether the object corresponds to the formal conditions of experience), its existence (whether it satisfies its material conditions), and its necessity (whether it suits its universal conditions). Thus, it is a matter of possibility, maybe extended into existence and necessity. And indeed, in the case of God, the impossibility of the demonstration of existence says *quoad nos* in the dimension of modality. It really goes without saying that, for Kant, God as object does not attain existence because he does not first comply with possibility (with its conditions of experience in space and in time). The impossibility of satisfying the a priori conditions of experience *as such* closes to God any access to possibility, hence to existence. Hence, the metaphysical *as such* is characterized by the limits it fixes for possibility in general, of which that of God only offers one particular case (indeed, it is not very particular, in no way exceptional). Yet by contrast, the *quoad nos*, at least in the sense where this “regarding us” is opposed to the metaphysical *as such*, would be characterized by the transgression of the a priori limits imposed on possibility, in other words, by the overcoming of the boundary between the possible and the impossible—by the exodus toward the impossible.

Access to the question of God *for us* must henceforth begin from what characterizes us and us alone, the boundary between the possible and the impossible, toward what characterizes it *for us*, the impossible *for us*. Yet for metaphysics, which only admits as object what is possible for our thought (logical noncontradiction, transcendental possibility, the difference matters little here), impossibility remains an unquestioned modality, forgotten and left as fallow—a simple reverse of possibility. For metaphysics, it is only a matter of looking for the unique possible grounding of a proof for the existence of God, and it is the impossibility of this possibility of grounding that suspends the search for any such proof. This stopping, for all that, is only necessary if one admits as self-evident that God himself does not constitute any exception, that he must exist, that this existence would have to be demonstrated, that this demonstration must be grounded, and especially that these three thoroughly uncriticized requirements are exclusively reg-

³¹ Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A219/B266.

istered in the territory of possibility. Yet what possibility is meant here? Obviously ours, finite and hence restricted to our exercising an *as* in a priori fashion. How could one not see that a God restricted to our possibility in this way, whether he exists or not, is demonstrated or not, grounded or not, is shown to be a non-God straightaway and definitively, because the question of God, when it is posited in this way, necessarily leads to a non-place? Here Nicholas of Cusa's paradox becomes intelligible: "It follows that, since nothing is impossible to God, it is necessary that we would look across the things which are impossible in this world toward him for whom the impossible is a necessity" (Unde cum Deo nihil sit impossibile, oportet per ea quae in hoc mundo sunt impossibilia nos ad ipsum respicere, apud quem impossibilitas est necessitas).³² As long as we stick with the battlefield of possibility *for us*, without wondering about the impossibility it reveals implicitly, we camp out in the territory where it can only be a matter of our finitude, of us, hence in no way of God. God only becomes a meaningful question from the moment at which our exodus transgresses the limits between the possible and the impossible *for us*, since the true *quoad nos*, the decisive "regarding us" confronts us with what does not belong to us, what remains essentially foreign to us, with the unthinkable for any *as such*—the impossible as the closest unknown. Hence, only God comes to mind: unless our idea, by imagining to bear itself toward God, will continue to forge for itself always new possible idols, *idola possibilitatis*. Only the incommensurable field of the impossible can deliver the least inkling of something sufficiently foreign, in other words, of what is too strange, in order to merit legitimately the un-naming of God.³³ God only comes to us to the exact extent that we march toward the impossible. Only the impossible can guide us toward this epiphany like a sure star in a catastrophic universe.³⁴

V

The impossible guides us in the exodus away from the idolatry of God as such. Even so, this paradox should not throw us off track, since it literally puts us on track toward the question of God. It contains nothing unthinkable.

³² Nicholaus of Cusa, *Dialogus de Possest*, in *Nicholaus von Kues Werke*, ed. Paul Wilpert (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1967), 2:66.

³³ On un-naming, see my *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraudchap (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 6, §2, 134–42.

³⁴ I am happy to cite here Bruaire, describing Kant's position: "The unique right invoked, but with the greatest scruple, was that of the *possible*. There were no others and it alone is imposed." To correct it immediately: "*The possible certainly, but all of the possible*, in its entire extent, this is what is required. Not the possible according to us, measured with our measure, enclosed in our images." For the "request of the absolute is not that of the impossible, which according to any divine right, we reject that what is impossible to human eyes would be possible to God" (Bruaire, *Le droit de Dieu*, 60, 65, and 88). It would be clearer to say: the impossible for us becomes the place of God, for whom all becomes possible. That is the sole divine right.

able, provided we respect its particular logic. Let me formulate its core without taking up again in detail an argument I have developed elsewhere.³⁵

In order to pose the question of God, reason must confront what is unique to God: whether he is or is not and what he would be. God is capable of what is impossible for humans (as said Homer and the ancient Greeks and Latins); or rather, God is capable of all that does not diminish his omnipotence (as thought the medieval theologians); or rather, God is the being who is capable of everything (according to Descartes and the Cartesians); or rather, finally, God holds the place of the impossible, indeed takes place as impossible (according to the thinkers of the end of metaphysics). The agreement of these traditions appears all the more impressive as they are opposed to each other on almost any other matter. In any case, a question only becomes a question of God, if our thought leaves its own territory of the possible, thus of the finitude that limits the impossible, in order to advance into the unthinkable territory of the impossible for us. For if a God would have to give up becoming an impossible, by definition he would only be a non-God. A first result follows from this: whether there is a God or not, whether he would have being or not, God is either said as the master of the impossible or fails to be said. Consequently, a reasoning that would conclude his impossibility (God does not exist because he does not admit of any concept, or because his essence would be contradictory or even immoral, etc.) in regard to a possible (and maybe optional or illegitimate) proof of the existence of God, becomes itself impossible. For if God is characterized by the impossible *for us*, the impossibility of conceiving him or of reaching him (which is obviously an impossibility for us) only intensifies the fact that he inhabits the territory of the impossible, which by definition we cannot access. It might not be possible to prove the existence of God (or, moreover, whether God has to exist or to be), but it is impossible to prove this impossibility *for him*, because the impossible only applies to us, dwellers of the possible, and has no meaning for him. Obviously, the point here is not to restore underhandedly the ontological argument (which depends on the necessity of the existence of God starting from the possibility of his existence), or to restore a skeptical fideism arguing that “the impossibility I have of proving that God does not exist discovers his existence for me”³⁶ (where existence dispenses with the possibility of demonstration), but it leads us to the conclusion to which Kant himself came: “In short, it is impossible to demonstrate that God is impossible” (Kurz, es ist unmöglich zu beweisen, daß Gott unmöglich sei).³⁷ This does not mean that possibility reestablishes itself fantastically beyond

³⁵ See my “The Impossible for Man-God,” in *Transcendence and Beyond: A Postmodern Inquiry*, ed. J. Caputo and M. J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), summarized in “L’irréductible,” *Critique*, nos. 706–7 (2006) and, finally, *Certitudes négatives* (Paris: Grasset, 2010).

³⁶ Jean de La Bruyère, *Caractères* (1688), “Des esprits forts,” §13.

³⁷ Kant, *Vorlesungen über Rationaltheologie, Religionslehre Pölitz*, in AA, 28, 2/2:1026.

the limits of the possible *for us* or that the impossible *for us* would disappear, since instead the impossible is doubled here. Yet what remains or becomes impossible consists in this: the impossible *for us* (and remaining such for us) appears from a point of view inaccessible for us (namely that of God) but possible *for him*. It is not a matter of annulling the boundary between the possible and the impossible for us, but to make impossible for us that the difference between the possible and the impossible would still be valid for God. We do not abolish the impossible into an imaginary possible for us, but we disqualify the conceit that assumes that what remains impossible for us would also be so for God. We must, so to speak, make the *quoad nos* (the “regarding us”) revolve around the impossible, so as to envision possibility for God in it.

A second consequence follows from this. The question of God survives the (possible) aporia of the response to this question. Even if the existence of God cannot and must not be proven, either because proving it would submit God to the conditions of our experience (and would result in a non-God), or because God does not have to be; even if, from our finite point of view, the “death of God” remains an unsurpassable horizon in this time of nihilism; even if we must at best abide in the “death of the death of God”—nevertheless the question of God remains open, like a wound that will not disappear, or rather like an appeal to exodus that will never be shut down. We find ourselves in a position of postatheism (which is more than a simple variant of post-theism), in the process of *anatheism*.³⁸ Supposing that we could rely only on Christian doctrine (and not, rather, on what it has made real, but that surpasses it immeasurably toward a different future, that is to say, the event of Christ), the impossibility of impossibility would suffice to put it beyond any deconstruction, because it consists itself precisely and straightaway in a deconstruction. This deconstruction results from its doubling of impossibility and demonstrates the entire limit of the possible that the metaphysical *as* has attempted. Furthermore, one cannot qualify Christianity as the religion of the leave-taking of religion, because it precisely does not constitute a religion. It does not constitute a religion because all religion connects humans in a possible commonality with the gods or even with a (non-)God, while the event of Christ puts Christians (and really all humans) in relation with the impossible for us as the possible for God. The salvation, which gives its name to Jesus (and reciprocally), arises by the confrontation with the impossible it imposes. It descends from the heavens like the Jerusalem of our exodus, a Jerusalem that we will not be able to conquer, or build, because it comes to us from elsewhere. “For humans this [is] impossible, but not for God. For all things [are] possible for God” (Mark 10:27). In other words, “τα αδυνατα παρα ανθρωποις δυνατα παρα τω θεω εστιν” (what is impossible for hu-

³⁸ According to the fortuitous formulation by Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

mans is possible for God) (Luke 18:27). Christianity's deconstruction in the final analysis comes down to the destruction of what was made impossible by the metaphysics that seized it at least partially and for a time, namely, access to the true impossible: the gift of God, which nobody has ever seen, in Christ Jesus, who made possible its only exegesis (John 1:18) and hermeneutics (Luke 24:27).

VI

A different paradox remains. How can we relate to the impossible from the depths of our proper place as mortals, the place of the possible? Undoubtedly, we would first have to argue that we would have no consciousness of this possibility without a preconsciousness of the impossible, namely through the idea of the infinite that according to strict Cartesian logic alone makes thinkable the idea of the finite. Thus, let us brush up against the border of the possible and of the finite (and brushing up against a border is sufficient for knowing it and for assuming what is beyond it). We do so as soon as we contemplate the possibility of the infinite, by definition impossible for us, *quoad nos*. More exactly, this *quoad nos* only reaches us or defines us because we can and therefore must always already return to it, like an impossible possibility for us, toward the impossible for the other than us. We experience this transgressing return straightaway in the un-naming of the *id quo majus cogitari nequit*, itself radicalized into *majus quam cogitari possit*. (I repeat that this does not imply any proof of existence and refuses even the least pronounceable essence.)

But there is more: one can contest Kant's reduction of phenomena to the rank of objects, by envisioning the possibility, even and first for us, of saturated phenomena, where intuition via excess would be shown to be irreducible to its subsuming under a concept (or combination of concepts) of any sort. Thus, in response to the four rubrics of a priori categories, the event (in regard to quantity), the idol (in regard to quality), the flesh (in regard to relation), and the icon or face of the other (in regard to modality).³⁹ Yet the excess of intuition here ruins the transcendental possibility, by restoring the itself of the thing that appears or can appear through its own initiative and following its proper dimension, exceeding our expectation and our precomprehension, that is to say, our a priori. The case of God, ignored by Kant, assuming he should ever manifest himself (reveal himself, hence manifest himself as a phenomenon, however paradoxical), can only take place by surpassing any place and any localization in thought *for us*. In this sense, saturated phenomena outline or anticipate already the experience of the impossible in the possible itself. By their essential and common

³⁹ On this point, which I take here as established, see my *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), chap. 4, §§21–23.

event-like character (and, moreover, the first type of saturated phenomenon, which determines all the others, consists precisely in the event), they attest only the impossible that we have all experienced, although we have never comprehended it—and precisely for this reason. The move to the impossible *for us* happens in certain instances at the very heart of the possible *for us*, just as the move to the infinite remains an intrinsic possibility for the finite. Certainly this does not happen through an experience of the object or of the finite phenomenon, which we would be able to synthesize and constitute according to our a priori, but it occurs in the mode of a counterexperience, which constitutes us and forbids us to synthesize it, and stripping us of the transcendental dignity of the *I* leads us to the status of the witness. This familiarity with the impossible *for us* in the middle of a henceforth be-dazzled (or rather dazzling) possible *for us* can be described, at least in outline, for three privileged cases. These three saturated phenomena occur by marshaling in themselves the work, the patience, the seriousness, and the pain of the impossible *for us*.

The first instance is due to death, and its description brings together a double insight of the phenomenological tradition, whether one describes it as the possibility of impossibility (Heidegger) or as impossibility of possibility (Levinas). Certainly the difference between the two approaches cannot be underestimated. When contemplated from the starting point of *Dasein* (or rather when what one envisions from it consists in *Dasein*), death remains first and foremost a possibility. Even more, it is the possibility par excellence for *Dasein*, who here finally discovers its being as possibility and not as a simple actuality, as in the case of the being of other beings. Even so, the fact remains that such a possibility, that of being-toward-death that is accessible only in the mode of the possible, leads to the absolute impossibility of any possibility. The final impossibility hence rightly becomes the very name of *Dasein*'s possibility, who experiences it via anticipation precisely as not experiencing it (counterexperience). Conversely, from the viewpoint that starts from the other (or rather when what one envisions in it consists in the suffering face of the other), death appears as the constraint that withdraws the slightest possibility from the other. Far from opening a nonreal possibility, it closes possibility itself, in general. Yet this abolition of possibility retains a positivity, precisely the one that allows experiencing impossibility directly. Directly? Not at all, since it is a matter of an impossibility to which only the one who does not experience it can bear witness, namely the survivor, who watched the other and not he himself endure it (or rather, the one who does not remain any longer in order to endure any sort of possibility). Here also, impossibility only comes through counterexperience. The difference of the phenomenological situations does not eliminate a common point: impossibility announces itself in death without the impossible here becoming accessible as such. The impossible remains outside of the range of the possible *for us*, even and especially because it determines it entirely for the final time. The

impossible announces itself as an absolute impossible, which annuls any possible *for us*, even that of experience as such. Even so, this excess of impossibility, which makes itself inaccessible at the precise moment of its greatest immanence by annulling any possible for us, turns itself around and turns into absolute possibility itself: of death, a possibility never attained for *Dasein*, an impossibility always inaccessible to the living witness in face of the dying; I know nothing of either, because I am never there. All the same, one can only conclude from this that when I will be there in person, there will no longer be a person to know it, hence death will never appear to me. On the contrary, if we know nothing of nothingness since I am not there, it remains the authority par excellence of the possible. And this is a possible that, since we know nothing of it by analogy with or anticipation of a possible experience for us, we must admit to harbor the entirety of the possible in general, here including what we call today the impossible *for us*. Insofar as death is impossible for us, it imposes on us the possibility for us of the impossible as such, without restriction.

The second case turns to birth. Here also the recent phenomenological tradition (Ricoeur, Henry, Romano) has established a description. Possibility par excellence is given in birth, the possibility of all possibilities. Not only because my coming to life constituted the indisputable condition for me to be able to deploy my faculties, execute my actions, encounter events, manage useful beings, love and hate other humans who were themselves born, but because what we name “life,” without ever being able to define it, consists precisely in the open (or better, opening) possibility and, by functioning thus as an opening, it opens the world and time, the world through time. This possibility of all possibilities goes even further: because it is the condition of possibility of other possibilities, it does not itself admit any condition for its own possibility. It does not even let in the authority that will define all these other possibilities indicated to arrive, namely myself, an *I* who wants them, foresees, decides, and executes or submits to them. Birth does not presuppose me, since it posits me and deposits me before itself; instead, I am the one who presupposes it. Although absolutely and inalienably mine, birth does not belong to me any more fully than life itself does, my life that I live and that does not belong to me—since, on the contrary, I live it only as long as it comes to me as not belonging to me, as it sustains me from outside myself, more me than myself, who am only through it and who am not it. My birth gives me everything, here including receiving it and receiving myself from it, together with all the other givens, as a posteriori as they are (I am given over to it). My birth confers my origin on me although I do not coincide with it—my origin refuses me any access to my origination. It gives me a possibility of originarity to which I can in principle not return. The origin hence indicates also the impossibility for me to reach my own origination. The impossible appears in the closing of the origination of my or-

igin. What gives all possibility to me does so only by showing me the impossible: first, my impossibility of going back to the origin, then the originary impossibility of knowing the origin from which I come forth. From what nothingness (or, what amounts to the same, from what prior being) could I have come forth *ex nihilo*? The impossibility of responding to this question results from the impossibility of reaching my origin originally as an ontic and derived indication. And hence my birth allows me straightaway to reach the impossible.

It remains to attain to the impossibility of impossibility, which we have above established as the distinctive feature of the question of God, even if merely from afar. Does not this case, which doubles impossibility for us by the impossibility for God, surpass decidedly what could approach the possible for us, even in the mode of counterexperience? While maintaining all precautions, one must nevertheless not renounce such an approach, even if remote. For there is a phenomenon that no impossibility can hold back from remaining possible, regardless of how impossible it might appear: the gift. For the gift is given and gives itself really without any presupposition, without the least condition of possibility. I only give by giving without reason, and this absence of reason (*a fortiori* of causality) precisely qualifies my gift as gift. For if I were to give for a reason (or due to a cause), I would engage in exchange, which is usually a laudable activity and certainly indispensable for the establishment of sociability, but which, as exchange, only gives in order to receive a just retribution in exchange. It does not matter in the end whether the recompense is real (a different thing, a sum of money) or unreal (an honor, a recognition, a service); I always have, or rather *we* have, good and sometimes just reasons for exchanging our gifts—which precisely are such no longer, since we have turned them into trade. The gift begins where trade ends, that is to say, where the reasons (and causes) for exchange disappear. The gift begins when I give expecting nothing in return, even if, sometimes, though not always and not often, a countergift comes, with the same lack of reason (and of cause) crossing my own free gratuitousness. I give for nothing, but also without giving preference to anyone, and, when I give truly, I give without giving anything—nothing other than myself. Therefore, the unconditioned unreality of the gift hinges entirely on the intention of giving, not because this intention gets rid of actual giving (faith without works is no longer faith at all), but on the contrary because a gift without intention of unconditioned gratuitousness would no longer be a gift, regardless of how real the exchange of property would have been (giving against one's will does away with the gift). From what faltering condition, what impossibility could make the gift impossible, if it only gives without reason, without reciprocity or reality, without anything other than itself and its intention? Nothing remains impossible for it, since it demands nothing but itself: *bonum diffusivum sui*, in other words, *donum index sui*, not *causa sui* but rather *gratia sui*—the

gift gives by love of giving. Thus, even in the territory of the possible for us, the impossible does not remain impossible for us.

The unconditioned, this peculiar characteristic of the question of God, thus does not remain foreign to us. It inhabits us, is more intimate to us than we are ourselves and is more highly elevated than our greatest excess.

Decreation as Substitution: Reading Simone Weil through Levinas*

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Of all of Simone Weil's ideas, perhaps the one most resistant to everyday moral sense, and yet the one that seems most central to understanding her later thought, is her strange and severe notion of *decreation*, the idea that the sole object of one's existence in this world ought to be to "give up" one's "existence." It does not help matters that no work of hers is devoted even in part to explaining, in anything like a sustained and systematic way, exactly what she meant by *decreation*. All Weil has left us on the subject are scattered fragments from her notebooks. It is almost as though she wanted to "decreate" *decreation* itself, to deny it existence as a well-defined philosophical notion so as to make it all the more difficult to appropriate only intellectually. Notwithstanding the risks involved in resorting to one controversial thinker in order to illuminate another, in this essay I suggest one way in which we might better understand Weil's notion without compromising its status as decrelated: through examining it in the light of the equally uncompromising ethical thought of Emmanuel Levinas.

Levinas was, notoriously, a severe critic of Simone Weil, whom he evidently never met despite their being contemporaries. Levinas's criticisms, however, were not aimed explicitly at Weil's notion of *decreation*, nor even at any aspect of her thought that could conceivably be characterized as philosophical. Instead he condemned her inability, as he saw it, to understand the Judaism into which she was born (but not formally raised)¹ and which she seemed evidently determined to reject. Her desire for mystical union with God struck Levinas as merely a selfish pursuit of personal salvation. He was dismissive of her hatred of the Old Testament Jehovah, who could order the extermination of entire peoples, pointing out that she herself—all too

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¹ She had "a completely secular upbringing" (Jane Doering, *Simone Weil and the Specter of Self-Perpetuating Force* [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010], 70).

true, unfortunately—had strangely little to say about the crimes committed in her own era against Jews, often in the name of Christianity.² These disagreements, serious as they are, nonetheless conceal a deeper resonance. For Weil, the main form God's love takes in this world is ordinary human compassion, the neighbor love we show for one another as fellow creatures infinitely removed from their creator. Weil's God is surprisingly limited, a God "absent from the world, except in the existence in this world of those in whom His love is alive"—those whose "compassion is the visible presence of God here below."³ As we shall see, the compassion she speaks of is essentially a form of self-denying openness to the other that could easily be characterized in Levinas's terms as "being divesting itself of being."

More problematic might seem to be the similarities in the criticisms often leveled at Levinas's and Weil's understandings of ethical agency and selfhood. Each has been faulted for proposing an ethical passivity that makes responsible action by a free moral agent impossible. Here it is important to realize, however, that Levinas is not primarily interested in offering moral guidance but is attempting to ground normativity—in fact, the very meaning of human life—in the face-to-face encounter. What is new in Levinas is not a new ethics, but the idea that subjectivity itself is "ethical" in a foundational sense we normally do not notice. Hence the goal of this essay is not to prove that Simone Weil's is a Levinasian ethics, but to show how Levinas's fundamental approach to human existence clarifies certain aspects of decreation that many have considered questionable or extreme—such as Weil's claim that we should desire nonbeing precisely in order to confirm our neighbor's being. In turning to Levinas, we should not make the mistake of assuming that we are confronted with essentially the same paradox again when he proposes that we are fundamentally passive before we are free moral agents—for as we shall see, Levinas is making a different type of claim altogether: a metaphysical one about the nature of human agency, not an ethical one about how we would best orient or structure our lives. This metaphysical claim, particularly in the form of Levinas's concept of substitution, seems to provide a plausible philosophical foundation for Weil's notion of decreation.

² Her anti-Judaism can hardly be disputed. A fair assessment may be found in Richard H. Bell, *Simone Weil: The Way of Justice as Compassion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 165–89. Levinas's criticisms of her thoughts on salvation, on the other hand, tend to be polemical and are frequently inaccurate, suggesting a reciprocal inability to understand her admittedly unorthodox Christianity. Levinas's one piece of writing devoted exclusively to Weil is "Simone Weil Against the Bible" (1952), but there are also references to her in "Loving the Torah More Than God" (1955). Both have been reprinted in Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

³ Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, trans. Richard Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 103 (hereafter cited as *FLN*).

Decreation, frequently mentioned in Simone Weil's late writings, is not always referred to by name. In the New York notebook (1942), for example, there are many passages such as the following in which the word never occurs:

Every man, seeing himself from the point of view of God the creator, should regard his own existence as a sacrifice made by God. I am God's abdication. The more I exist, the more God abdicates. So if I take God's side rather than my own I ought to regard my existence as a diminution, a decrease.

When anyone succeeds in doing this, Christ comes to dwell in his soul.

As regards myself, I ought to repeat in the opposite sense the abdication of God, I ought to refuse the existence that has been given me, to refuse it because God is good. As regards other people, I ought to imitate God's abdication itself, to consent not to be in order that they may be; and this in spite of the fact that they are bad. (FLN 213)

However straightforward this may be as Weil's references to decreation go, it inevitably raises a great many questions. What can it mean to "refuse one's existence"? How does my "consent not to be" enable others to be, and why is my responsibility for those others evidently so extreme and indiscriminate that in effect it eclipses any concern on my part for the responsibility they might bear either for me or for their own actions, even when evil? Underlying all of these is a basic question about human selfhood: What is the nature or ontology of a self that has the ability—evidently even the obligation—to consent to its own nonexistence as a present fact?

Since decreation has an obvious ethical side, the last question might be rephrased: Exactly what is it in us that consents to good, what chooses evil?⁴—for Simone Weil's short answer would be "nothing," or "next to nothing." That is, the infinitesimal, uncreated part of the soul, which belongs to God, consents to the good, while the created, autonomous part, essentially nothing at all, chooses evil.⁵ Decreation is the voluntary conversion of the second into the first, the acceptance of the real nullity of the created part as compared with the uncreated part. Weil calls it "moral death" (FLN 328): "Really to die, in the moral sense, means consenting to submit to everything whatsoever that chance may bring. Because chance can deprive me of everything that I call 'I'. To consent to being a creature and nothing else. It is like consenting to lose one's whole existence" (FLN 217). In a similar vein,

⁴ Miklos Vető, *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil*, trans. Joan Dargan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 37.

⁵ Vető notes that "the internal logic of Weil's thought seems to suggest that for her 'creation' is only the creation of autonomous beings, and that only those invested with free will are creatures." He then quotes from her notebooks: "*Genesis* separates creation and original sin because of the requirements of a narration made in human language. But the creature in being created preferred itself to God. Otherwise would there have been creation? God created because he was good, but the creature let itself be created because it was evil. It redeemed itself by persuading God through endless entreaties to destroy it" (*Religious Metaphysics*, 16; cf. FLN 123).

she often characterized decreation as submission to what she called *necessity*, “the necessity which is the substance of the universe but which, as such, only manifests itself to us by the blows it deals.”⁶ Necessity makes use of what we call chance but is not the same thing. It is one of the two faces God presents to us, the other being love.

If decreation is the imitation of God through abdicating one’s existence so that others “may be,” then it must qualify as the most complete affirmation one could give of the other as other. It would be, in Miklos Vetö’s words, nothing less than “the acknowledgment, in the universe, of relationships that are independent of us—the acknowledgment, that is, of reality as such.”⁷ Using an image of Weil’s, Vetö suggests that it is only when we mistake these relationships for realities centered around ourselves that our supposed understanding of them, “like the mistaken addition of the child, bears the mark of the self.” Ideally, our understanding should be “impersonal.” A perfect relation with the Other, and with reality as a whole, will carry no trace of the self. Hence, Weil writes that God loves, “not as I love, but as an emerald is green. . . . And I too, if I were in the state of perfection, would love as an emerald is green. I would be an impersonal person” (*FLN* 129). Only such “impersonal” love constitutes true recognition of the other as other.

Thus decreation is not just accepting the truth that we are utterly defenseless and vulnerable as human beings, a vulnerability often enough acknowledged, up to a point, by conventional wisdom. Rather, it is realizing, and living by, the superficially obvious but, in practice, all too easily overlooked ethical truth that there is something—more important, someone—in the world besides oneself. For when Weil writes that, “It is given to very few minds to discover that things and beings exist,”⁸ I believe she really does mean that we have great difficulty in recognizing, in our day-to-day relations with other people, the reality of the other person as other. An ethics of decreation would at a minimum involve cultivating the purest, practical appreciation one can of the fact that one shares this moment of grace called life with neighbors—an awareness of how charged with responsibility the mere fact of the presence of others is at every moment.

For all that, Weil’s writings on decreation leave us with little idea of how the subject or self is supposed to relate itself to such a concept, whether intellectually or practically. How does one make decreation a guiding principle in life? Is it an act, or an attitude? Does one will it and pursue it consciously—does one “decreate oneself”—or does one wait for it? If the latter, with what

⁶ Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper, 2001), 108 (hereafter cited as *WG*).

⁷ Vetö, *Religious Metaphysics*, 22.

⁸ Letter to Bousquet, quoted in Vetö, *Religious Metaphysics*, 171 n. 60: “And she confesses to him: ‘From my childhood I have desired only to receive this revelation . . . evil actions are those that hide the reality of things and beings, or those that it would be impossible to do if one truly knew that things and beings existed.’”

stance toward Other and world does one wait? In short, to borrow a phrase from Levinas, how can such a “passivity of the self become a ‘hold on oneself’” without reverting to nihilism or quietism?⁹ It would be tempting to conclude that, once decreated, nothing would be left of the self as an ethical agent in even the most attenuated sense—were not such a conclusion clearly incompatible with Simone Weil’s ideal of loving action. Needless to say, this makes it all the more difficult to reconcile decreation with traditional philosophical views of the self.

On almost all such views, however, the other exists for the subject primarily as an intentional object of consciousness. It is therefore against the grain of an entire philosophical tradition that Emmanuel Levinas insists that ethics, at its foundations, is incommensurable with any conscious perspective a subject may claim vis-à-vis others. For Levinas, all conscious understanding of the other person is little more than a reinforcement of, or re-encounter with, my own self. In the end, it is from within myself that I draw all the knowledge I apply to the persons I encounter, and it is into myself again that I reintegrate whatever I think I have learned about them and about humanity. Levinas sees all conscious efforts to understand the other as necessarily intentional in Husserl’s sense of the word, and therefore willful: in all of my intentional acts, however innocent or impartial they may appear to be, “the will is affirmed”; the ego is “in the end affected only by itself. Subjectivity taken as intentionality is founded on auto-affection as an auto-revelation.”¹⁰ Conscious “understanding” of another automatically precludes establishing the genuine relations with the other as other that Levinas calls ethical. Thus Levinas often refers to ethics as a “communion” or “communication” in order to emphasize that it is other- rather than self-affirming.¹¹ It is only insofar as my ego “does not appear but immolates itself, that the relationship with the other is possible as communication and transcendence. . . . As an adventure of subjectivity which is not governed by the concern to rediscover oneself, an adventure other than the coinciding of consciousness, communication rests on incertitude (here a positive condition) and is possible only as deliberately sacrificed. Communication with the other can be transcendence only as a dangerous life, as a fine risk to be run.”¹² But if the ethical subject is not fundamentally a consciousness vis-à-

⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, “Substitution,” in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 89.

¹⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 111 (hereafter cited as *OB*).

¹¹ *OB* 118–21. In fact, ethics does even more than this: it is a “communication” that brings the very world we share into being. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 73, 252 (hereafter cited as *TI*).

¹² Levinas, “Substitution,” 92. See also Robert Bernasconi, “What Is the Question to Which ‘Substitution’ Is the Answer?” in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, ed. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 236: “Communication with the other is transcendence only in so far as the sovereignty of consciousness is displaced.”

vis the other, what then is it? Levinas's surprising answer is that subjectivity itself is responsibility.

I will argue that Levinas's "ethical metaphysics" provides a foundation for Weil's controversial and ambiguous notion by giving us a way to see decreation as instrumental to the development of ordinary human ethical subjectivity. The argument, however, will require our engaging with Levinas's own ambiguous and controversial notion of substitution.¹³

Substitution is not an act, something one does, but a trope for the fact, as Levinas sees it, that one is created¹⁴ already responsible for all other persons—a responsibility asymmetrical to such a degree that one is responsible even for the other's responsibility. Simply to be a subject is, for Levinas, already to substitute for the other, to answer for him or her in everything. I explain this further below, but to anticipate the argument, let me propose that decreation is how substitution looks "from the inside"—that is, from the perspective of a subject whose identity as a subject derives from being "the-one-for-the-other." Equivalently, substitution is the context within which decreation comes into focus as a truly plausible, even basic human experience. Hence, in the course of elucidating the general nature of human selfhood, Levinas provides us with something like a phenomenology of the decreative state. In many of Levinas's later works one can find passages which seem to justify viewing substitution from a decreative perspective, and which even allow us to give it a religious inflection reminiscent of Weil's, although not of course an explicitly Christian one: "As a responsible I, I never finish emptying myself of myself. . . . The religious discourse prior to all religious discourse . . . is the 'here I am,' said to my neighbor to whom I am given over."¹⁵ "The problem of transcendence and of God and the problem of subjectivity irreducible to essence . . . go together."¹⁶ "The deposition [or perhaps *abdication*] by the I of its sovereignty as an I . . . signifies the ethical, but probably also the very spirituality of the soul."¹⁷ "What is at stake for the self, in its being, is not to be" (*OB* 117). And finally, as early as *Totality and Infinity*, we find Levinas writing that subjectivity is to be defined by its ability to "renounce itself by itself, renounce itself without violence, cease the apology for itself." He then assures us, much as Weil does in contrasting decreation with de-

¹³ Levinas discusses substitution at length in two places: in chap. 4 of *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence* (1974) and in the somewhat earlier essay "Substitution" (1968).

¹⁴ Levinas continually emphasizes *creation* as the best description of how we come to be the ethical subjects we are, since he must insist that subjectivity is not something that happens to a preexisting "self." Rather, becoming a self "happens" as a result of a prior encounter with the other. Hence the origin of the self, from its own perspective, can only seem like a creation *ex nihilo*.

¹⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, "God and Philosophy," in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 73, 75.

¹⁶ *OB* 17.

¹⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, "The Bad Conscience and the Inexorable," in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 177 (my gloss).

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struction, that “this would not be a suicide nor a resignation, but would be love” (*TI* 253).

II

Simone Weil often implies that one’s very existence as a human individual depends on one’s relations with others in a deeply radical way. A good example is the following passage:

He who treats as equals those who are far below him in strength really makes them a gift of the quality of human beings, of which fate has deprived them. As far as it is possible for a creature, he reproduces the original generosity of the Creator with regard to them. . . . He who, being reduced by affliction to the state of an inert and passive thing, returns, at least for a time, to the state of a human being through the generosity of others; such a one, if he knows how to accept and feel the true essence of this generosity, receives at the very instant a soul begotten exclusively of charity. . . . To treat our neighbor who is in affliction with love is something like baptizing him.¹⁸

For Levinas, too, I become an individual, a subject, only in relation to other people, but he goes further than Weil by detailing a mechanism—more accurately, a metaphysics—that makes responsibility toward others the basis of subjectivity. Essentially, Levinas reverses the orientation of Weil’s example: with regard to what I owe the other, I am never in a position of strength; the other is always stronger than I am, in the sense that he unrelentingly places me in his debt. My becoming a subject coincides with my being subjected to the other from the very beginning, in something like the ordinary sense of submitting to a greater power, except that the power is solely that which others have, even before I meet them, of continually forcing me back to my responsibility. Inexplicably, because prior to anything I can remember—from a “time before time,” is how Levinas phrases it—I discover within myself my accountability to the one who is not myself, already substituted for my neighbor without ever having chosen it, quite apart from whatever the laws of necessity or social convention may dictate.¹⁹

At no time, then, can I ever honestly go back to the same “self”—I can never rest at home with myself, comfortable in the familiar consciousness of know-

¹⁸ *WG* 88, 89–90. Another example: “Through compassion we can put the created, temporal part of a creature in communication with God. It is a marvel analogous to the act of creation itself” (*FLN* 103).

¹⁹ We are called by the other as ethical subjects prior to our being selves with memories of a past. This could explain why we cannot recall ever having chosen to be responsible. Nevertheless, the priority mentioned here should not necessarily be understood as temporal. Levinas’s main point is a transcendental one: the other’s call to respond is the basic condition for one’s being a self, in the sense that the life of the human subject derives its whole meaning from the ethical encounter with the other. It should be pointed out, however, that everyday ethical relations are vastly more complex than the primordial ethical relation described here, since they involve the other others and therefore require the mediation of justice “moderating or measuring the substitution of me for the other” (*OB* 159).

ing who I am—for always I find the other already there, challenging me from within to redefine myself once again through my ethical response. The other, prior to any move on her part to communicate to me explicitly, in this way commands me, as Levinas puts it, to take responsibility for all of her misfortunes and faults. The other's command defines me as a subject by giving me precisely this unique and nontransferable responsibility. By putting me on the spot ethically, a spot no one else can occupy, it assigns to me my identity as an individual—an identity which is an impersonal (in Weil's sense) "nonidentity"²⁰—by assigning to me the unique and inescapable task of acknowledging the other as literally no one else can, through self-forgetful concern for that person's needs as revealed specifically before me in this particular time and place. "Subjectivity in itself is being thrown back on oneself. This means concretely: accused of what the others do or suffer, or responsible for what they do or suffer. The uniqueness of the self is the very fact of bearing the fault of another" (*OB* 112). "I am one and irreplaceable, one inasmuch as irreplaceable in responsibility" (*OB* 103). One might say that there is nothing more nor less to our subjectivity than our bearing one another's faults. My subjectivity has a purely ethical foundation: the self results from being called by every other to be responsible for every other, an idea Levinas often liked to convey by quoting from Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*: "Each of us is responsible before everyone, for everyone and for everything, and I more than the others." To summarize it in Levinas's typically hyperbolic language: "under accusation by everyone, the responsibility for everyone goes to the point of substitution. A subject is a hostage" (*OB* 112).

Substitution means that ethically the boundary between myself and the other seems almost to dissolve, so that however unique we are as two different perspectives on the world, however unequal we may be in terms of worldly advantage or strength, in the end I must find it impossible to distinguish her well-being from mine. If one makes this a conscious realization vis-à-vis the other, then it is clearly a form of self-denial comparable to the annihilation-of-self that Weil associates with imitating the divine abdication: "God denied himself for our sakes in order to give us the possibility of denying ourselves for him" (*WG* 89).²¹ The resemblance her idea bears to substitution is all the more striking a page later, when Weil writes that the person

²⁰ See Levinas's essay "No Identity," in Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998).

²¹ For Simone Weil, one's self-denial is meant to be an intentional response to an absent God's love, whereas for Levinas it is a nonrelational (because prior to consciousness) "response" to an ethical "command" coming from the face of the neighbor before me. Levinas does sometimes use religious language to describe the moral force of the face, calling it the "trace" of the God who has "passed by": "The revealed God of our Judeo-Christian spirituality maintains all the infinity of his absence, which is in the personal 'order' itself. He shows himself only by his trace, as is said in Exodus 33. To go toward Him is not to follow this trace which is not a sign; it is to go toward the others who stand in the trace of illeity" ("Meaning and Sense," in Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 107). Levinas's term *illeity* refers to the "third person who in a face has al-

“from whom the act of generosity proceeds can only behave as he does if his thought transports him into the other. . . . [He] accepts to be diminished by concentrating on an expenditure of energy, which will not extend his own power but will only give existence to a being other than himself, who will exist independently of him” (WG 90). Weil goes so far as to express this as “consenting” to one’s own “destruction” (WG 91) in favor of the other’s “creation.”²² Without this emphasis on “destruction”—here closely allied with Weil’s notion of “affliction,” to which we will turn in a moment—the image of being “transported into the other” could easily be dismissed as hyperbolic metaphor. Decreation is a “self-destruction” to which the other invariably calls me—a call integral with the ordinary course of life, if no less “supernatural” for all that.²³ While it is not yet clear what the call calls me to do, it should be evident that decreation, like substitution, amounts to an ethical relation to the other which, far from privileging my “being” over against theirs, deliberately reverses the priority I naturally give to self-preservation. But how does such a reversal become concrete? Must one literally make a physical sacrifice of oneself? For good reasons, Weil is reluctant to give us an explicit formula, although she therefore leaves us somewhat in the dark as to how one reverses so basic a priority. Levinas’s answer might be that there is no need for us actually to do anything: the reversal is already the essence of what it means to be a self. Subjectivity is already to be substituted for the other. Whatever it may subsequently entail in terms of action, substitution is not something one wills or even does; it is the very essence of human selfhood. In Levinas, therefore, we find not merely certain striking parallels with Simone Weil’s thought, but a way of understanding decreation as in some sense a basic ingredient or fulfilment of ethical subjectivity.

For Levinas, the other as other is beyond the reach of consciousness. One cannot be conscious of the other as truly other, since to be conscious of something is to give it at least a minimal meaning—if nothing else, the meaning of being “something in the world besides oneself”—and this is already to transform it into what Levinas calls the same, however “other” than oneself one may nonetheless take it to be. Consciousness in itself makes the other a part of oneself, and thereby “the negation of the other.”²⁴ But we have seen that I am already substituted or assigned, prior to any conscious commitment, to an other who, in their otherness, is “incommensurable”

ready withdrawn from every relation”—that is, the pure otherness of the other, “the whole infinity of the absolutely other” (104). The encounter with the trace happens at a more fundamental level than decreation, although the two concepts are obviously compatible.

²² “Whatever a man may want, in cases of crime as in those of the highest virtue, in the minutest preoccupations as in the greatest designs, the essence of his desire always consists in this, that he wants above all things to be able to exercise his will freely. To wish for the existence of this free consent in another, deprived of it by affliction, is to transport oneself into him; it is to consent to affliction oneself, that is to say to the destruction of oneself” (WG 91).

²³ For Weil’s use of the word “supernatural” to refer to human virtues such as compassion or patience, see, e.g., *FLN* 89, 91, 210, 264, 323, 335. This is far from Levinas’s habit.

²⁴ Vetö, *Religious Metaphysics*, 21.

with consciousness—for this assignment is the very foundation of commitment, of ethics, even of consciousness in general (*OB* 100–101). In no other way but from out of a past prior to anything accessible to human memory, as Levinas expresses it, can I know anything about an other as other. Responsibility, in the sense Levinas means it here, is the origin of subjectivity because, prior to all human ethics in the usual sense, it “assigns the self to be a self” by assigning the self to the other, substituted for every other, without exception (*OB* 106). It cannot be emphasized enough that this necessarily happens prior to any act of consciousness. We cannot understand substitution as a willful act on the part of a conscious subject, since it is what makes subjectivity possible in the first place, prior to all conscious action.²⁵

Opposed to substitution, although obviously necessary, is one’s freedom to give meaning to things, to turn the unfamiliar and strange into the familiar and same, a freedom Levinas calls spontaneity. Thus the “strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics” (*TY* 43). In other words, ethics is the expression of the vulnerability of every aspect of my world at any moment to being called into question by the other, since all of it, as “my world,” is a product of my spontaneity. When Simone Weil claims that “chance can deprive me of everything that I call ‘I,’” she is evidently acknowledging the same vulnerability to being called into question, a vulnerability that, in “The Love of God and Affliction,” she connects with the ever-present possibility, characteristic of all created beings, of the experience of extreme suffering.²⁶ The role of suffering in Weil’s thought is therefore hardly gratuitous. The philosophical importance of suffering, as the principal concrete evidence of our vulnerability as human selves, becomes especially clear when viewed in light of Levinas’s claim that my being called into question is the source of my responsibility and therefore of my very self as “assigned.” Aside from its responsibility for others, the self possesses nothing it can call its own, not even its own being as a self, much less its well-being. In Weil’s more religious terms, “Our sin consists in wanting to be, and our punishment is that we believe we possess being. Expiation consists in desiring to cease to be; and salvation consists for us in perceiving that we are not” (*FLN* 218).

We can now finish answering a question posed earlier: Is decreation something that can be willed? In the passage just quoted, “wanting” (to be) and “believing” (that we possess being) are arguably willful acts, but desiring to cease to be is not normally so. Weil tells us that in general, “desire is always suffering,” because it is of the essence of desire that “it is unsatisfied” (*FLN*

²⁵ Again, despite the temporal language, the priority indicated here is not necessarily temporal. The point is that consciousness depends on the ethical encounter, not the other way around.

²⁶ Simone Weil, *The Simone Weil Reader*, ed. George A. Panichas (Wakefield, RI: Moyer Bell, 1977), 439–68, esp. 454.

284). It is not hard to believe that desiring to cease to be could be a form of suffering, since it is equivalent to the always painful operation of giving up one's will. I want to compare it for a moment to the extreme form of suffering Weil called affliction, without at all implying that the experiences are equivalent. Affliction "is quite a different thing from simple suffering. It takes possession of the soul and marks it through and through with its own particular mark, the mark of slavery. . . . Affliction is an uprooting of life, a more or less attenuated equivalent of death, made irresistibly present to the soul by the attack or immediate apprehension of physical pain."²⁷ In affliction only a very small part of the soul, the uncreated, infinitesimal, "supernatural" part, has the ability to consent that the experience continue if such be God's will. Aside from that tiny ember of pure love for God, one cannot find anywhere else within oneself the strength to consent to affliction. The overwhelming desire that it stop is the reason it turns the afflicted into "stone"—insensitive to self, to others, to the entire world outside of the pain.²⁸ Very few of us ever experience anything in life so extreme. Why then does Weil place so much emphasis on it? Perhaps it is because affliction is so pure a sign that salvation, if it exists, lies in the infinitesimal, supernatural part of the soul—in the soul's giving its consent to the truth that apart from God it is nothing. Acceptance of affliction is, as it were, the extreme limit of decreation. If the nullity of all that one calls one's own is the more obvious in affliction, nevertheless in all forms of decreation we do not so much give up our will as realize that we cannot fail to give it up unless we choose to fail, since the will is not. The will has no real existence; we must actively imagine that we have such a thing before we can even be in the (spiritually unenviable) position of having to give it up. But in that case, giving it up is simply acknowledging that it is only the product of one's imagination.

If decreation is consent to the fact that the will is nothing, then it is clear that one cannot possibly will decreation. Alternatively, this consent might be characterized as a form of waiting—for if it cannot be willed, then the ability to give one's consent can only result as an unexpected gift. From where does the gift come? Without hesitation Weil would say it comes from God, just as one's free will is originally the gift of God's act of creation (*FLN* 211). While this answer may satisfy faith, it still leaves open the question of the relation such a gift has to the self. If Levinas, who in his philosophical writings tends to avoid reference to God, would say that the gift is from the other, in any case it is the same gift: the gift of "nonbeing" or "nonidentity" that one receives through one's act of placing the other's well-being before one's

²⁷ Simone Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," in Panichas, *Simone Weil Reader*, 439–40.

²⁸ "This of all procedures turns a man to stone. . . . He is living, he has a soul, yet he is a thing. . . . The soul was not made to dwell in a thing; and when forced to it, there is no part of that soul but suffers violence" (Simone Weil, "The *Iliad*, Poem of Might," in Panichas, *Simone Weil Reader*, 155).

own. One becomes a “hostage” to the other, consenting to “a passivity no ‘healthy’ will can will.”²⁹ Whatever gift I might seem to make to the other in the world’s eyes, the other divests me of it and of everything else I consider my own, including the illusion that in my giving I make a free decision for the other. In an essay titled “What Is the Question to Which ‘Substitution’ Is the Answer?,” Robert Bernasconi writes, “To accept responsibility for the suffering undergone [by the other] is to be challenged to act, but this action does not have its seat in the spontaneity of a willing subject conceived in artificial isolation”; in my giving such a gift, “the other can be said to dispossess me . . . so that giving is not an act, but an ethical event whereby I lose my sense of mine in the face of the other.”³⁰

Perhaps, then, one of the questions to which substitution is the answer is, What is decreation? Rebecca Rozelle-Stone cites a passage from *Gravity and Grace* in which Weil, speaking from the point of view of the person in need, similarly places the accent not on the freedom of the giver but on the other’s freedom to be “surprised” by the gift—a gift Weil elsewhere calls “grace”:

Gifts are, by definition, beyond the bounds of our control and manipulation. Weil offers an eloquent description of the nature of this sort of offering, coming down to one who does not seek it: “With all things, it is always what comes to us from outside freely and by surprise, as a gift from heaven, without our having sought it, that brings us pure joy. In the same way, real good can only come from outside ourselves, never from our own effort. . . . Thus effort truly stretched toward goodness cannot reach its goal; it is after long, fruitless effort which ends in despair, when we no longer expect anything, that, from outside ourselves, the gift comes as a marvelous surprise.”³¹

Since one “despairs” of bringing about anything good in oneself, the Good is always “beyond” or “outside.” Decreative consent is nothing if not the resolute desire for the Good: not desire for particular good things we might have a chance of actually acquiring for ourselves or for others, in that way satisfying our desires, nor even simply for a good outside ourselves, but desire for a good “outside the world,” the world in which we usually imagine that satisfaction can be found. For Weil, God is this good outside the world, the Good itself: “God is the Good. He is neither a thing nor a person nor a thought. But in order to grasp him we have to conceive him as a thing, a person, and a thought” (*FLN* 300). Elsewhere she writes: “There is a reality outside the world. . . . Corresponding to this reality, at the center of the human heart, is the longing for an absolute good, a longing which is always there and is never appeased by any object in this world.”³² From a philosophical

²⁹ Simone Weil, “No Identity,” in Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 149.

³⁰ Bernasconi, “What Is the Question to Which ‘Substitution’ Is the Answer?,” 240 (my gloss).

³¹ Rebecca Rozelle-Stone, “Simone Weil and the Ethic of (Im)moderation,” in *The Relevance of the Radical: Simone Weil 100 Years Later*, ed. Rebecca Rozelle-Stone and Lucian Stone (London: Continuum, 2010), 23. Compare Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (London: Routledge, 1952), 41.

³² Simone Weil, *Selected Essays*, trans. Richard Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 219.

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standpoint, some have found the notion of a desire for a good “outside the world” problematic. Peter Winch asks, “How could there be anything analogous to a desire the object of which cannot intelligibly be said to be attained or possessed by anybody, as is the case with the good?”³³ Not knowing what else to do with it, one may be tempted to relegate it to the “supernatural”—that is, “nonphilosophical”—substance of Weil’s thought. But let us see how Levinas might lend a philosophical understanding to it. It turns out that the desire Weil speaks of is very close to what Levinas calls “metaphysical desire.”

III

Simone Weil’s claim, that one should love nothing in this world so much as one would love the Good were the Good to exist, implies that if the Good “exists” anywhere, it is necessarily “outside the world.”³⁴ It is precisely in its this-world unattainability that the Good is desirable—something to be desired, as opposed to something we can actually attain. To have this desire is nevertheless to be assured of possessing, in some sense, the thing desired, for “the desire for good is itself a good” (*FLN* 316). “If the desire for good equals the possession of good, the desire for good is the producer of good, that is to say it produces the desire for good” (*FLN* 310). In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas suggests virtually the same idea when he contrasts ordinary needs, which by definition are capable of being satisfied, with desires, which are not: “metaphysical desire . . . cannot be satisfied. . . . It is like goodness—the Desired does not fulfill it, but deepens it. . . . a generosity nourished by the Desired . . . for it nourishes itself, one might say, with its hunger” (*TI* 34). The Desired nourishes desire by feeding our desire for it. For Simone Weil, this amounts to acquiring the very thing desired, namely the good, but as in Levinas, this does not mean actually possessing it in any other form than one’s desire for the good:

All I can do is to desire the good. But whereas all other desires are sometimes effective and sometimes not, according to circumstances, this one desire is always effective. The reason is that, whereas the desire for gold is not the same thing as gold, the desire for good is itself a good. If the day comes when all the desire in my soul is de-

³³ Peter Winch, *Simone Weil: “The Just Balance”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 125; more emphatically, “since the whole point of her conception of a ‘negative sovereign good’ is that it will make no sense to speak of an agent as gaining possession of it, it cannot be a possible object of desire” (127).

³⁴ “So I relinquish the totality of worldly things for the sake of the good. . . . But—it will be asked—does the good exist? What does it matter? the things of this world exist, but they are not the good. Whether the good exists or not, there is no other good than the good. And what is this good? I have no idea—but what does it matter? It is that whose name alone, if I attach my thought to it, gives me the certainty that the things of this world are not goods. If I know nothing more than that name I have no need to know any more, provided only that I know how to use it in this way” (*FLN* 315–16).

tached from the things of this world and directed wholly and exclusively towards the good, then on that day I shall possess the sovereign good. Will it be said that I shall be left without an object of desire? No, because desiring in itself will be my good. Then will it be said that I shall still have something left to desire? No, because I shall possess the object of my desire. Desire itself will be my treasure. (FLN 316).

The “sovereign good” Simone Weil says she would possess were all her desire, without remainder, directed to the good, is itself the pure desire for the good. Paradoxically, to possess the good is exactly the same as to desire it with all of one’s soul. This is clearly not the same thing as the satisfaction of a need, in Levinas’s sense of need which he contrasts with metaphysical desire. In fact, as we noted earlier, Weil would insist that a perfect relation to the good must be an impersonal relation in which the self, and therefore all of its achievable satisfactions, actual or potential, would play no part. Like metaphysical desire, such a relation would maintain itself solely by its insatiable desire for the good.

With Descartes’s Third Meditation in mind, Levinas calls desire “a thought destined to think more than it thinks”³⁵: “The infinite in the finite, the more in the less, which is accomplished by the idea of Infinity, is produced as Desire—not a Desire that the possession of the Desirable slakes, but the Desire for the Infinite which the desirable arouses rather than satisfies” (TI 50).³⁶ Levinas does more here than give us an echo of Simone Weil’s notion that the desire for the good is satisfied by producing the good of desire itself. His nuanced analysis of desire suggests a way to understand Weil’s Platonic idea that we naturally desire the Good: it is the result of our being already created (he would be as insistent as Weil, if for different reasons, on the use of that word) to desire the neighbor’s good. For Levinas, this desire is what it means to be a subject—in particular, a subject with a body: “[The] oneself is . . . incarnated in order to offer itself, to suffer and to give” (OB 105). We are incarnated to be ethically exposed. To be a subject is to be exposed to the accusation of the other, “exposed as oneself in the accusative” before one ever acquires an identity in the nominative (OB 106). In other words, the self is not identified (given its “identity”) by name or by personal history, or even by its unique perspective on the world, but comes to be solely in the very fact that it can say to the neighbor, “Here I am.” The expression is much better in French, which keeps the accusative case of the personal pronoun: “*Me voici*.”³⁷ For Levinas, this is the very definition of the subject: “The word *I* means *here I am*, answering for everything and everyone” (OB 114). Against Hobbesian “state of nature” arguments, Levinas makes a reference to non-being reminiscent of Weil: “All the transfers of

³⁵ Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” 67.

³⁶ In later works, Levinas speaks less often of “desire” in favor of an unusual notion of “obsession.”

³⁷ The Hebrew *hineni*, usually translated imperfectly as “here I am,” is unequivocally in the accusative.

sentiment which theorists of original war and egoism use to explain the birth of generosity . . . could not take root in the ego were it not, in its entire being, or rather its entire nonbeing, subjected not to a category, as in the case of matter, but to an unlimited accusative, that is to say, persecution, self, hostage, already substituted for others.”³⁸

Levinas’s idea, that the original unity of the self, prior to the ego that names and identifies itself or can tell a story about itself, is a unity produced by the call of responsibility, also helps ground Weil’s frequently misunderstood notion of “Christian materialism.” The original unity of the self, claims Levinas, is “a passivity more passive than the passivity of matter” (*OB* 113–14). He means that the self, unlike passive matter, is vulnerable to the other to its very foundations, simply in being capable of action, through having a body that can answer for the other’s actions by responding with its own. Its greater passivity or vulnerability, as compared with matter, is paradoxically the result of its greater capacity to act. Because its vulnerability is not a contingent loss of control but constitutes the very selfhood of the self, the self finds itself to be other even to itself. It cannot count on itself always being “the same” (in Levinas’s sense of the word) from one moment to the next. Incarnated from the very beginning, and for that reason capable of action out in a world with others, one finds oneself called outside of oneself, held to account even before one has had a chance to commit oneself consciously—much less feel at home with such a commitment. For Levinas, our bodies are material proof of an infinite ethical debt we incur simply in having been born, for embodiment means that we are created to be responsible for one another. This way of putting it could help clear Simone Weil of the charges of nihilism or lack of ethical freedom often leveled at her constant emphasis on inflexible material necessity. Necessity in fact becomes the very basis of the responsibility that makes us ethical subjects.

One becomes a self precisely by passing, as Levinas says, from suffering to expiation, by taking responsibility even for the other’s responsibility. This passing does not occur once and for all, but is a continual recurrence. Levinas also calls it “obsession” or “persecution”: “Persecution is not something added to the subjectivity of the subject and his vulnerability; it is the very movement of recurrence. The subjectivity of *the other in the same*, as an inspiration, is the putting into question of all affirmation for-oneself, all egoism born again in this very recurrence” (*OB* 111). Egoism is continually reborn as the rebirth of the same. It is our way of making sense of the world, an attempt to make it safe and familiar. But this necessary, self-preserving activity is not what makes one a subject. Rather, subjectivity results from the recurrent invasion of our always unfolding self by the other, so that we never have the chance to acquire anything we could call our own private space.

³⁸ Levinas, “Substitution,” 91.

What makes one a self is the “infinite passion” of responsibility returning again and again, but never allowing the self to come to rest in itself, for the self is defined by this recurrence. Recurrence “breaks open the limits of identity,”³⁹ and thus one finds one’s “identity” only by allowing the whole notion of identity to be called into question, broken into from outside by a call so fundamental that in any of us it can escalate into becoming our lifetime calling or vocation: “The identity of the same in the ‘I’ comes to it despite itself from the outside, as an election or inspiration, in the form of the uniqueness of someone assigned” (*OB* 52).⁴⁰ With this idea, the “core self” with which, according to popular wisdom, one is supposed to “get it touch,” evaporates; one cannot “go home” to the “self” without finding the other already there—which is to say that there is no going home at all, if this means reclaiming anything one can call one’s own. As Hugh Miller eloquently expresses it, the other “ceaselessly returns me to myself in recurrence and yet never lets me dwell there as in my domicile . . . but sends me instantly back out in service. My home, as it turns out, is already occupied, by the homeless, by the Guatemalan refugee, by the Jewish refugee.”⁴¹

This, for Levinas, is what it means to be fully a self. It is to possess nothing for one’s self, absolutely nothing at all, that is not already claimed by the other. To be conscious of being such a self would mean refusing to call anything one’s own. It would mean acknowledging that one is fully subject to the other—in the language of Simone Weil, it would be to refuse one’s existence. To say, as Levinas says, that one’s existence belongs primordially to a transcendent good, is another way of saying, as Weil might be more inclined to put it, that it belongs to God. If Levinas tends to avoid the religious language, at the same time he gives us a metaphysics that seems capable of supplying her thought, which we have almost entirely in fragmentary form, with some of the philosophical basis it often seems to be groping for and just missing. Of course, reading Simone Weil through Levinas can hardly make the task of life, whether expressed in terms of decreation or of substitution, any easier. But surely it is significant that each seems to make it more difficult in almost exactly the same way.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁴⁰ However, writes Bernasconi, Levinas “would think it a mistake to characterize my being elected as what defines me. The identity of ipseity as recurrence ‘breaks open the limits of identity’ [“Substitution,” 89]. It is the breaking open of identity that makes possible sacrifice and responsibility for all, even for my persecutor. ‘Uniqueness is without identity’ (*OB* 57). But my lack of identity is not what makes possible substitution: ‘it is already a substitution for the other’ (*OB* 57)” (“What Is the Question to Which ‘Substitution’ Is the Answer?,” 244).

⁴¹ Hugh Miller, “Reply to Bernhard Waldenfels, ‘Response and Responsibility in Levinas,’” in *Ethics as First Philosophy: The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy, Literature and Religion*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak (New York: Routledge, 1995), 57.

Negative Experience in Calvin's *Institutes* and Its Systematic Consequences*

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Many commentators have noted that, contrary to his popular reputation for cold rationalism, John Calvin's theology manifests a strongly experiential dimension.¹ Much of Calvin's theology is concerned with describing how Christians do not merely assent to the gospel, the primary message of which is that sinners have in heaven not a judge but a loving father,² but experience its reality and power for themselves.³ What has received less attention is the way that Calvin often also uses the word "experience," along with other words amounting to the same thing, to direct the reader toward the troubling realities encountered in the life of faith that are difficult to harmonize with the fundamental message of the gospel. Along with a few others, Willem Balke has noted that this "negative experience," as he calls it, is an important element in Calvin's description of the vicissitudes of faith.⁴

I believe that the significance of negative experience in Calvin's theology is much broader than previous studies have indicated. A careful study of the

* This article benefited from the careful review of Susan Schreiner, Garry Sparks, and several anonymous reviewers, for which I am deeply grateful.

¹ Charles Partee, "Calvin and Experience," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 26 (1973): 169–81; Brian Armstrong, "*Duplex cognitio Dei*; Or, The Problem and Relation of Structure, Form and Purpose in Calvin's Theology," in *Probing the Reformed Tradition: Historical Studies in Honor of Edward A. Dowey, Jr.*, ed. Elsie Anne McKee and Brian Armstrong (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1989), 138–42.

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill and trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics, vols. 20 and 21 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), bk. III, chap. xi, sec. 1 (hereafter *Institutes* III.xi.1).

³ Studies that have focused on experience in relation to the Word include Partee, "Calvin and Experience"; Willem Balke, "Revelation and Experience in Calvin's Theology," in *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology: Tasks, Topics, Traditions*, ed. David Willis and Michael Welker (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), which follows very closely an earlier article by Balke, "The Word of God and Experientia According to Calvin," in *Calvinus ecclesiae doctor* (Kampen: Kok, 1979), 19–31; Francis Higman, "Calvin et l'expérience," in *Expérience, coutume, tradition au temps de la Renaissance*, ed. M. T. Jones-Davies (Paris: Editions Klincksieck, 1992), 245–56.

⁴ Balke, "Revelation and Experience," 358. See also Brian Gerrish, "'To the Unknown God': Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God," in *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982), esp. 144.

language and content of the *Institutes* demonstrates that the refractory thread of negative experience wends its way through many loci in Calvin's theology: the law, faith, justification and sanctification, perseverance, and predestination. In what follows I first draw on previous studies of experience centered on Calvin's doctrine of faith and knowledge to formulate the basic pattern that characterizes the relation between faith in the gospel and both positive and negative experience. Identifying this pattern facilitates locating its reiteration and development in the above loci. Finally, I conclude by arguing that this pattern offers a contribution to the search for the elusive systematic character of Calvin's theology.⁵ Specifically, an important factor that defines the systematic character of Calvin's theology is a productive tension between the gospel and negative experience.⁶ If the gospel is the promise of God's mercy and love that serves as the principal systematic theme for Calvin's soteriology, then one might even say that negative experience represents a counter-systematic theme that diverts Calvin's theology into supplemental excursions. Coming at the expense of structural simplicity, these excursions are occasions for Calvin to deepen his insights into two principal topics: the irrational intransigence of fallen human nature, and the mysteries of God's will beyond the simple gospel promise.

⁵ Richard Muller (*The Unaccommodated Calvin* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2000], 101–2) polemically reviews many current and past studies pertaining to whether and how Calvin's theology is systematic. Against a recent trend seeking to liberate Calvin from the reputation of being a stilted systematizer, Muller concludes that Calvin is indeed systematic but in a way that can be appreciated only in view of his various theological genres and in relation to sixteenth-century systematics (5, 177–79). While Muller's genetic and contextual approach is an important and helpful corrective, I do not believe it obviates the kind of structural approach I employ here nor an approach focused primarily on the *Institutes*. Paul Ricoeur (*Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* [Ft. Worth, TX: TCU Press, 1976], 12–13, 29–30) presents a relevant defense of structuralist interpretation over and against an attempt to recapture authorial intent. My approach in this essay shares much with a line of studies of Calvin's theology that attempt to specify operative tensions or a dialectical character in Calvin's theology, an approach that Muller rejects in general (*Unaccommodated Calvin*, 4 and 188); see Hermann Bauke, *Die Probleme der Theologie Calvins* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1922); Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of John Calvin*, trans. Harold Knight (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956); Benjamin Charles Milner Jr., *Calvin's Doctrine of the Church* (Leiden: Brill, 1970); Ford Lewis Battles, "Calculus fidei," in *Calvinus ecclesiae doctor*, ed. Wilhelm H. Neuser (Kampen: Kok, 1980), 85–110; Kilian McDonnell, *John Calvin, the Church, and the Eucharist* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967); Mary Potter Engel, *John Calvin's Perspectival Anthropology* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988); Marijn de Kroon, *The Honour of God and Human Salvation*, trans. John Vriend and Lyle D. Bierma (Edinburgh: Clark, 2001). Also relevant are those studies that emphasize the practical and rhetorical rather than purely "systematic" character of Calvin's work, including Serene Jones, *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1995); and William J. Bowsma, "Calvinism as *Theologia Rhetorica*," in *Articles on Calvin and Calvinism: The Organizational Structure of Calvin's Theology*, vol. 7, ed. Richard Gamble (New York: Garland, 1992).

⁶ I essentially follow Dowe in distinguishing scripture, "the formal authority of special revelation," from the Gospel or the assurance of God's mercy, "the material of saving faith and the proper object of faith's knowledge"; see E. A. Dowe, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 155–63. I prefer "gospel" to Dowe's emphasis on Christ because it arises from Calvin's own usage (*Institutes* III.ii.29), and I am not convinced by Dowe's assertion that "'faith and the gospel' . . . is the same as faith and Christ."

EXPERIENCE AND NEGATIVE EXPERIENCE

Identifying any single meaning of "experience" in Calvin's theology is difficult. After surveying the diversity of its meanings, Francis Higman concludes that the notion of experience in Calvin's theology is a "nose of wax that can be twisted at will."⁷ While Calvin's use of the term appears arbitrary on occasion, Higman's conclusion is precipitous. Greater consistency in Calvin's usage of the term will appear if we distinguish different uses of experience operating in tension; hence I follow Balke by employing a distinction between "positive" and "negative" experience. In essence, positive experience confirms faith; negative experience challenges it.

In his study of experience, Willem Balke keeps the confirmation of faith by positive experience front and center; but he also takes careful note of negative experience: "Calvin has a double understanding of experience. On the one side there is the engagement with the Word which leads to the certainty of faith and salvation; on the other, the various experiences taking place in times of despair and temptation, experiences into which the believer is drawn over and over again through the same Word which had awakened his or her faith. . . . In such negative experiences the only thing that helps is an uninterrupted attentiveness to the Word."⁸ Word and experience, Scripture and life will mirror each other ideally; negative experience happens when that mirroring grows dim. Yet Calvin believes that even the trials that result from ambiguities in the joining of life and scripture can work to the nourishment of faith, for faith can and even must be strengthened by undergoing trials.⁹

Drawing on Balke and other studies,¹⁰ as well as Calvin's treatment of experience in his commentaries,¹¹ a plausible pattern for the double role of experience within the dynamics of faith emerges. Because sin has corrupted

⁷ Higman, "Calvin et l'expérience," 255.

⁸ Balke, "Revelation and Experience," 358.

⁹ Barbara Pitkin (*What Pure Eyes Could See: Calvin's Doctrine of Faith in Its Exegetical Context* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1999], 138–39) traces the origin of this idea.

¹⁰ In addition to the studies cited in n. 3, see Dowey, *Knowledge of God*; Pitkin, *Pure Eyes*; Walter E. Stuermer, *A Critical Study of Calvin's Concept of Faith* (Ann Arbor, MI: Edwards Brothers, 1952); Randall Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

¹¹ See esp. the Commentary on Joel 3:17, in *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia* (hereafter *CO*), 59 vols., ed. Wilhelm Baum, Edward Cunitz, and Edward Reuss, vols. 29–87 of the *Corpus Reformatorum* (Brunswick: Schwetschke, 1848–1900), 42:596, and the Commentary on Isaiah, *CO* 36:273 (cited in Zachman, *Assurance of Faith*, 184–85). On the faith/positive experience distinction see *CO* 31:660 (Commentary on Ps. 71:17) and *CO* 44:162 (Commentary on Zech. 2:9, cited in Balke, "Revelation and Experience," 355). See also *CO* 31:276 (Commentary on Ps. 27:9) and *CO* 31: 435 (Commentary on Ps. 43:2–3). Particularly expressive of the return to the Word from negative experience is the Commentary on Rom. 4:20, as cited by Zachman, *Assurance of Faith*, 184: "We must close our eyes, disregard ourselves and all things connected with us, so that nothing may hinder or prevent us from believing that God is true." Further in this discourse on Abraham, however, it becomes clear that a return to the bare Word through negative experience is not the ultimate destination; ultimately, Calvin believes, "The help of God . . . will

our perception of God in the world, Calvin initially secures saving knowledge by excluding “naked experience,” which yields only the experience of one’s own sin and God’s curse (II.vi.1). Instead of experience, salvation begins with the Word of God’s mercy accepted in faith.¹² A mere mental assent to the gospel would not suffice; faith “requires full and fixed certainty, such as men are wont to have from things experienced and proved” (III.ii.15).¹³ Ideally, faith progresses and deepens as the believer more and more experiences the reality of God’s promises of mercy and aid in her life; the Word, that is, is confirmed and interiorized in positive experience.¹⁴ In this way the Holy Spirit works to seal the truth of faith in the hearts of the faithful.¹⁵ In reality, though, personal experience often seems to belie the knowledge of God on which faith is founded.¹⁶ In Dowey’s words, experience, “which in some respects confirms faith, tries it sorely in others.”¹⁷ As Balke sees it, the trials of negative experience can force the believer to take “recourse to the Word of promise,” that is, to backtrack from seeking confirmation in experience to relying on the objective Word apart from experience.¹⁸ Even so, negative experience can still bear useful fruit; only through it do the faithful come to appreciate the reality of “the flesh,” the human condition in its fallenness and limitation. In this way, Calvin’s willingness to take account of negative experience with regard to faith and knowledge opens a source of self-knowledge.

Clearly, negative experience plays an important role in Calvin’s doctrine of faith and knowledge. Yet I shall show that the importance of negative experience extends beyond this one locus.¹⁹ The very beginning of the *Insti-*

contribute to the confirmation of our faith” (*Calvin’s Commentaries: The Epistles of Paul The Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, trans. Ross MacKensie [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960], 101).

¹² Balke, “Revelation and Experience,” 356.

¹³ Partee, “Calvin and Experience,” 174; Balke, “Revelation and Experience,” 356; Pitkin, *Pure Eyes*, 142–62.

¹⁴ Balke (“Revelation and Experience,” 356) captures this positive side of experience: “Experience appears in close proximity to the Word. It has to do with truth and reality. Truth tends always toward reality. The Scripture is true; we will experience it.”

¹⁵ Ibid., 354. Calvin associates the Spirit with experience in I.xiii.14. On the Holy Spirit and faith, see also Werner Krusche, *Das Wirken des Heiligen Geistes nach Calvin* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1957), esp. 235–55.

¹⁶ Commenting on Isaiah, Calvin concedes that God can appear otherwise than merciful in our experience: “For where the signs of God’s anger are visible on all sides, and where according to the judgment of the flesh we believe that he is full of wrath, his favor is concealed from us” (CO 36:273, cited by Zachman, *Assurance of Faith*, 184–85).

¹⁷ Dowey, *Knowledge of God*, 196. Dowey sees three sides to faith: the foundation of faith upon knowledge conferred by the Word, the experience by faith of “negative psychological aspects,” and the mystical union of the believer with Christ. Though the ordering is different, this corresponds roughly to my threefold scheme of experience.

¹⁸ Balke, “Revelation and Experience,” 357.

¹⁹ I will not attempt to expand on the origins of Calvin’s concept of experience in his earlier writings and in his theological contemporaries and predecessors. The work of previous studies on this front could be expanded.

tutes gives us every reason to expect that matters pertaining to the knowledge of God will be integrated into its systematic structure: "Nearly all the wisdom we possess . . . consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves" (I.i.1). The two sides of knowledge form the most general matrix within which the relation between Word and experience will take shape throughout the *Institutes*.²⁰

NEGATIVE EXPERIENCE IN OTHER LOCI

In essence, the pattern by which Calvin employs experience in the doctrine of faith and knowledge is simple: faith begins with the outer Word or gospel, moves toward interiorized confirmation in positive experience, yet at times is repelled by negative experience to return to the Word alone. Now I turn to investigating the broader and even systematic role of negative experience by setting its use in the doctrine of faith alongside similar occurrences across a number of loci: law, faith, justification, sanctification, perseverance, and election.²¹

In the *Institutes*, one of the first occurrences of negative experience is found in Calvin's treatment of the first use of the law.²² Careful attention to this locus reveals the same general pattern in the use of negative experience. According to its first use, the law convicts sinners of being unable to please God through works. This conviction necessitates abandoning the idea of sinless saints. Calvin insists that the belief in saints who are not burdened with concupiscence "goes against both Scripture and the evidence of experience [*experientiae ratione*]." ²³ He immediately cites scripture to support his case; it is clear that Calvin, in contrast to some modern users of these terms, does not at all regard experience and Scripture as mutually exclusive sources. Indeed, it appears that experience is not so much a source of knowledge but more a mode of apprehending through personal confirmation.

²⁰ T. H. L. Parker (*Calvin: An Introduction to His Thought* [Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1995], 13–14) declaims perhaps too emphatically the global importance of this distinction ("the theme of the whole of the *Institutio*"), yet as regards the relation of revelation and its subjective reception in experience, this distinction is crucial. I agree with Dowey's critiques of Parker's excesses (*Knowledge of God*, xv–xvi, 252), but I see little fruit from selecting between Parker and Dowey's own emphasis on the *duplex cognitio Domini*, Creator and Redeemer. Both are seeking a twofold key to Calvin (the issue of a fourfold creedal organization is also involved); I suspect the dialectical shape of his theology is more subtle and complex than Dowey indicates (see the appreciative comments on Trinitarian interpretations of esp. Willis in Dowey, *Knowledge of God*, 256–57). My own concluding twofold proposal is not dialectical in Dowey's sense, nor does it claim ultimacy as a structuring principle.

²¹ To achieve an orderly presentation of the occurrences of experience, I will follow the sequence of the *Institutes*, supplementing the material there with examples from the commentaries and tracts.

²² There is an interesting earlier occurrence of negative experience in *Institutes* I.xvi.3.

²³ *Institutes* II.vii.5; for Latin text, see *Ioannis Calvini opera selecta* (hereafter *OS* with volume and page), ed. Peter Barth, Wilhelm Niesel, and Dora Scheuner (Munich: Kaiser, 1926–52), iii.330.

The above example is not isolated, even if the word “experience” is not used: “Every man willing to look upon himself with an honest eye can be his own witness” to the impossibility of satisfying the law.²⁴ This and many other passages I will discuss show that locating Calvin’s views on experience are not as simple as performing a word search. The theme of experience, and particularly negative experience, shows up most often under the word itself, but Calvin never defines “experience” and stylistically likes to vary his language. In my approach, studying his use of the word “experience” helps to locate the pattern that runs throughout the loci; identifying the pattern, in turn, helps to locate equivalent language when experience as such is not named.

If the content of experience is available from Scripture—in this case, the impossibility of fulfilling the law—why does Calvin advert also to experience? I surmise that here Calvin’s emphasis falls on knowledge of ourselves of a particularly negative sort: we must own up to the sheer fact of our human weakness and incapacity. This failure does not make sense; we ought to be able to fulfill God’s law. Thus Calvin presents the impossibility of fulfilling the law as a contingent (i.e., not of necessity) but inescapable fact: while conceding that perfect obedience to the law is righteousness, he asserts that “we deny that such a form of righteousness exists anywhere” (III.xvii.7). “I call ‘impossible’ what has never been, and what God’s ordination and decree prevents from ever being. . . . I say that none of the saints . . . has attained to that goal of love” (II.vii.5). The appeal to experience does not attempt to explain or justify the sheer fact of this impossibility, but through a personal and self-reflective mode of confirmation invites the reader to own up to and take responsibility for the failure to fulfill the law. This appeal to the reader’s own experience concurs with the law’s function as a “mirror,” for in the law we see our own weakness and experience God’s curse (II.vii.7). The law, in accordance with its first use, leads one to a personally confirmed knowledge of one’s own sinfulness.

Yet even here knowledge of ourselves cannot be separated from knowledge of God, as suggested by the above reference to “God’s ordination and decree.” That is, the appeal to experience does not amount to an empirical induction; rather, God’s revealed holiness and perfection factors into the appraisal of human incapacity to perform works deserving praise: “And how could there be such a work before those eyes, to which not even the stars are clean enough, nor the angels righteous enough?”²⁵ Once one acknowledges the absolute holiness of God, one can no longer pretend to have righteously fulfilled the law in one’s deeds. Knowledge of self remains correlated to

²⁴ *Institutes* III.xiii.3; cf. III.xiv.9.

²⁵ *Institutes* III.xvii.9, with reference to Job. See Susan Schreiner, *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found? Calvin’s Exegesis of Job from Medieval and Modern Perspectives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 106.

knowledge of God—in this case, as the absolutely holy one. We might say that experience is not empirical but hermeneutical—a correlation between the revealed knowledge of God and self-reflective awareness. The resulting confirmation of sin still merits the designation “negative experience,” since what has been revealed and confirmed is still short of the Word of God’s good favor.

FAITH

The human incapacity to fulfill the law makes one conscious of the curse of God and thus drives one to seek righteousness outside of works and one’s own capacities. Calvin shows how the work of Christ in Book II establishes the possibility of salvation *extra nos* (outside ourselves);²⁶ he further develops salvation *extra nos* in III.xi (on justification). This salvation concerns not at all what we do (the knowledge of ourselves) but what God has done in Christ (the knowledge of God). Reflecting the objective, *extra nos* nature of justification, Calvin defines faith initially as “the knowledge of God’s will toward us, perceived from his Word” (III.ii.6). However, the *extra nos* theme is not equally diffused throughout Calvin’s doctrine of justification, particularly when it comes to its conjunction with sanctification. Rather, as many commentators have noted, the believer’s union with Christ is the dominant principle in Calvin’s soteriology.²⁷

It follows that Calvin’s discussion of faith does not long dwell on the objective content of faith but soon turns to faith’s personal, experiential element. The personal element is concurrent with the work of the Holy Spirit in us, by whom the knowledge of faith is “sealed upon our hearts” (III.ii.7). Calvin soon makes clear that the assent of faith “is more of the heart than of the brain, and more of the disposition [*affectus*] than of the understanding” (III.ii.8). The felt dimension of faith, particularly in the face of struggle, constitutes a central aspect of positive experience: God’s goodness is not placed beyond doubt without “our truly feeling its sweetness and experiencing it in ourselves [*experiamur in nobis ipsis*].”²⁸

At the same time, however, the chapter on faith (III.ii) is among those with the most frequent references to negative experience, roughly as often as in the later chapters on election.²⁹ Previous scholarly treatments of negative experience have rightly focused on these passages. But the role of neg-

²⁶ “If, then, we would be assured that God is pleased with and kindly disposed toward us, we must fix our eyes and minds on Christ alone” (*Institutes* II.xvi.3).

²⁷ See, among others, Charles Partee, “Calvin’s Central Dogma Again,” in *Articles on Calvin and Calvinism: The Organizational Structure of Calvin’s Theology*, vol. 7, ed. Richard Gamble (New York: Garland, 1992).

²⁸ *Institutes* III.ii.15 (*OS* iv, 26).

²⁹ To be sure, Calvin was compelled to address the arguments taken from scripture by opponents, including both Catholics and Socinus; thus Calvin acknowledges many instances in which Scripture details the trials of the faithful.

ative experience in the struggles of faith must be seen within the broader, four-book structure of the 1559 *Institutes*. When Calvin in Book III turns to the believer's appropriation of Christ's saving works, which were the subject of Book II, he invariably brings in both positive and negative experience. Thus at the opening of Book III, Calvin introduces two new themes side by side. One is that "all that [Christ] possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with him," drawing attention to the need for personal appropriation (or "inwardly embracing" the promises in the discussion of faith, III.ii.16) and thus for positive, confirming experience. Juxtaposed to this, the other theme is a very different claim about the secret work of the Spirit that is likewise peculiar to Book III: "Yet since we see that not all indiscriminately embrace [Christ] . . . reason itself teaches us to climb higher and to examine into the secret energy of the Spirit" (III.i.1).³⁰ With this Calvin introduces the significant Trinitarian corollary of negative experience: while God's will is visibly known in Christ, it is partly hidden in the work of the Spirit here and now and can only be inferred by experience. In Book III Calvin consistently adverts simultaneously to both positive and negative experience; throughout we find both a confirmation of and a going beyond the Word in its narrow sense (as gospel).

DOUBT

The uses of negative experience in the faith chapter (III.ii) concern two matters, linked to a degree: the experience by believers of doubt and trials, and the experience that some people seem to acquire faith for a time but afterwards fall away, apparently into perdition. The latter issue, taken up below, will lead into a discussion of experience and election. Regarding the former, Calvin treats doubt and the temptation to think that God is not merciful throughout III.ii.³¹ The principal thrust of Calvin's response is to affirm that faith, armed with the Word and continuing to call upon the Lord, will overcome every trial; in other words, faith means a confidence in the vic-

³⁰ I take the *videmus* ("we see") and the "reason itself" here to be additional markers of negative experience; they indicate a way of knowing that does not rely solely on the Word but arrives at conclusions through one's own reflection on what one personally encounters.

³¹ Dowey and Stuermer have treated the experience of doubt and temptation within Calvin's doctrine of faith at length, highlighting the tensions between the "formal" or "systematic" statements and the "psychological" or "realistic" descriptions; see Dowey, *Knowledge of God*, 192–97; Stuermer, *Calvin's Concept of Faith*, 236–58. According to Stuermer, Calvin's discourse on experience serves as an "inductive source of realism" for the doctrine of faith, whereas Calvin could have relied on "metaphysical and theological deductions." These terms are out of place; but relevant to my conclusion is Stuermer's point that negative experience is in tension with the systematic impulse, i.e., the desire for evident coherence (382). On temporary faith and doubt within faith, see also Zachman, *Assurance of Faith*, 181–87, and Randall Zachman, "Crying to God on the Brink of Despair: The Assurance of Faith Revisited," in *Calvinus Praeceptor Ecclesiae: Papers of the International Congress of Calvin Research*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2004), 351–58.

tory of positive experience.³² I have already drawn attention to the argument in III.ii.15, which recounts how faith must include the positive, self-certifying experience of God's goodness. This heartfelt certainty is not experienced only occasionally, but Calvin insists that it is "a firm conviction" (III.ii.16) and that this "root of faith can never be torn from a godly breast" (III.ii.21). Calvin specifically rejects the notion that confidence and unbelief would alternate in the mind (III.ii.24).

Yet in those passages where Calvin specifically invokes "experience," including III.ii.17–18 and 37–38—the latter two sections framed by particular attention to the work of the Spirit (III.ii.33–36 and 39)—Calvin's description of the life of faith is less sanguine. In response to those who assert that "believers experience something far different" from constant assurance, Calvin concedes, "While we teach that faith ought to be certain and assured . . . we say that believers are in perpetual conflict with unbelief" (III.ii.17). For Calvin this experience of doubt creates a potential problem, since he has so closely bound salvation not only to knowledge of God but also to positive experience. The 1559 edition shows some evidence of more readily facing up to this issue, perhaps reflecting an increasing confrontation with the hiddenness of God.³³ Sixteen years after composing the argument in III.ii.24 against the alteration of confidence and unbelief, Calvin tacks on a seemingly antithetical concession that "interruptions of faith occur . . . so that in the thick darkness of temptation its light is snuffed out." These experiences obviously raise the question whether one can in fact experience the requisite steadfast, unwavering faith which Calvin continues to insist "ultimately triumphs over those difficulties which besiege and seem to imperil it" (III.ii.17).

One significant rhetorical shift that develops as Calvin attempts to reconcile these two sides of the doctrine of faith—that saving faith is an immediate and steadfast enjoyment of God's mercy, and that experience includes moments to the contrary—shows up when Calvin suggests, here and there, that faith ought to be certain and secure even though it is not in fact always so. "Surely, while we teach that faith ought [*debere*] to be certain and assured, we cannot imagine any certainty that is not tinged with doubt."³⁴ Somewhat differently: "This bare and external proof of the Word of God should have been [*debebat*] amply sufficient to engender faith, did not our blindness and perversity prevent it."³⁵ Negative experience has a way of converting the "is" of justifying faith, or whatever reality is conveyed with certainty by the Word,

³² Zachman, "Crying to God" attends to this theme in Calvin's commentaries on the Psalms as well as *Institutes* III.ii.20–21.

³³ Schreiner, *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?*, 104, notes that in Calvin's sermons on Job (beginning in 1554) the issue is not temptation to moral failure so much as to spiritual despair at the hiddenness of God in history.

³⁴ *Institutes* III.ii.17 (OS iv, 27).

³⁵ *Institutes* III.ii.33 (OS iv, 44). See also *Institutes* III.ii.38: "But since faith ought to correspond to a simple and free promise, no place for doubting is left."

into an “ought to be.” This migration from “is” to “ought,” prompted by experience, shows up in other texts.³⁶

JUSTIFICATION AND SANCTIFICATION

Thus far, the apparent general effect of negative experience on Calvin’s systematic theology is that in attending to it, Calvin is led to concede that greater distinctions and tensions are at play in theological concepts, as between faith and doubt, than he initially indicates. This effect, restrained in the above examples by Calvin’s strong commitment to faith, is augmented in Calvin’s depiction of the relation between justification and sanctification, particularly in response to Osiander’s apparent conflation of these two doctrines: “Osiander objects that it would be insulting to God and contrary to his nature that he should justify those who actually remain wicked. Yet we must bear in mind what I have already said, that the grace of justification is not separated from regeneration, although they are things distinct. But because it is well known by experience [*experientia*] that the traces of sin always remain in the righteous, to be justified must be different by far [*longe aliter*] from their being reformed into newness of life.”³⁷ In other words, the extent of the difference between justification and sanctification, that is, between the acceptance of the sinner by grace and the transformed life of holiness that should result, is known personally through the experience of continuing sin after one has come to faith. Calvin believes that Osiander’s problem is his conflating two forms of righteousness—the one imputed (simply declared by God) and the other imparted as real power through the believer’s union with Christ—within justification. Calvin insists that this “twofold righteousness” must be kept conceptually distinct: the first as justification, the second as sanctification. Generally in this section Calvin emphasizes differences and distinctions as against Osiander’s conflations: between the human and divine natures of Christ, between the bond of divine and human in Jesus and the resulting bond of believers as mediated by the Spirit, and between justification and sanctification.

The concern to relate properly the two graces of justification and sanctification is a hallmark of Calvin’s theology. Elsewhere, he posits a close union of justification and sanctification.³⁸ Yet it is against Osiander that Calvin most emphasizes their distinction, with reference to experience. Calvin goes on to discuss Paul’s exclamation of his own sinfulness (supposedly) in Rom.

³⁶ See the next section. The “ought” makes an appearance in the Commentary on Joel 3:17 (CO 42:596), a significant text for negative experience: “His word ought indeed to be sufficient for us in the greatest evils.”

³⁷ *Institutes* III.xi.11 (OS iv, 193), translation altered.

³⁸ Both are conferred by Christ and obtained through faith (*Institutes* III.iii.1). To separate them would be to tear Christ in pieces (*Institutes* III.xvi.1). Justification and sanctification occur “simultaneously [*simul*]” (*Institutes* III.ii.8, iii.19, xi.6, xiv.9, and above all, xvi.1).

7:24. On the juxtaposition of Paul's confidence of having his righteousness in Christ with his consciousness of being a sinner, Calvin comments: "This diversity is sufficiently known [*satis nota est*], and so familiar to all the saints who groan under the burden of iniquities and yet with victorious confidence surmount all fears."³⁹ The note of negative experience is again evident here, as Calvin appeals to the experience of the reader to internalize and confirm the realism about the flesh found in scripture using a phrase that is almost identical to the previous mention of experience ("it is well known by experience" [*experientia plus satis notum est*]).

Ideally, sanctification follows naturally from justification. Negative experience confronts one with the failure of this ideal. The "ought" returns to fill the gap: "When God offers forgiveness of sins, he usually requires repentance of us in turn, implying that his mercy ought to be [*debere esse*] a cause for men to repent."⁴⁰ "God's beneficence ought to have [*debebat*] allured us to esteem and love his goodness."⁴¹ But in fact, as confirmed by experience, these causal sequences are far from necessary. It is certainly plausible that if one looks to the Word and to Christ, and so is caught up in the positive experience of the union with Christ through the Spirit, one could experience justification and sanctification undivided. Yet this unity, however much it ought to be the rule, appears instead as an exception because of the deep corruption and sin made known in negative experience. To echo a point made by Balke, because of this negative experience, believers often need to have recourse to justification *extra nos*, by which God "by continual forgiveness of sins repeatedly acquits us" (III.xiv.10).

TEMPORARY FAITH

Thus far, the examples of experience have pointed to one or another contingent but inviolable truths of the human situation: the weakness of the flesh before the law, in faith, and in sanctification. While this knowledge is available in Scripture, only experience can effectively impart it, for the truth of human weakness must be known for oneself. This knowledge by negative experience is arguably essential for believers to live out their faith with a practical and realistic grasp of the limitations inherent in the world and in themselves. In the remaining examples, however, Calvin begins to direct the reader by way of negative experience to the mysteries of God's will. Despite the important shift in content, these next examples display a structure similar to the negative experience that exposes "the flesh."

First of all, I return to the faith chapter to revisit the negative experience of temporary faith. In this case, believers observe that some attain what

³⁹ *Institutes* II.xi.11.

⁴⁰ *Institutes* III.iii.20 (OS iv, 77).

⁴¹ *Institutes* III.viii.5 (OS iv, 165).

appears to be heartfelt faith, only to fall away afterward. The principal location is III.ii.11–12, sections added in 1559 that Calvin lifted almost verbatim from his letters to Socinus.⁴² The preceding section 10, dating to the 1536 and 1539 editions, extends Calvin's critique of "unformed faith" by reference to Simon Magus (Acts 8:13), that paragon of false faith. The 1559 additions elaborate on the issue of temporary faith. As noted above, faith that penetrates the heart gives the believer an immediate and self-confirming experience of God's mercy, and upon this experience is grounded the certainty of salvation and election. But experience is not always so clear: "For though only those predestined to salvation receive the light of faith and truly feel the power of the gospel, yet experience shows [*experientia tamen ostendit*] that the reprobate are sometimes affected by almost the same feeling as the elect, so that even in their own judgment they do not in any way differ from the elect."⁴³ A similar use of experience, now as *usus* ("practical experience"), shows up in section 12: "Although it is evident from the teaching of Scripture and daily experience [*quotidiano usu*] that the wicked are sometimes touched by the awareness of divine grace," they lack the Spirit of love.⁴⁴

The experience of those who fall away from the faith, which surely was not rare to Calvin's mind, compounds the ambiguity presented above by the experience of doubt in the believer. If I am experiencing doubt and my faith is not always equally robust, then how do I know I am elect, especially when others have likewise declared their faith, only later to fall away?⁴⁵ Or as Calvin posits, "Suppose someone objects that then nothing more remains to believers to assure themselves of their adoption." While Calvin says that this difficulty is "easily solved," and grounds his answer on the claim that those who fall away never had a true foundational experience of faith to begin with, this whole passage is strained and contorted, for he is at pains to draw a clearly demarcated line where experience suggests a gray area.⁴⁶ Adding to the complexity of the problem, God is also involved, giving temporary or partial faith to some "to render them more convicted and inexcusable." Thus, Calvin describes how the reprobate can receive a "lower working of the Spirit [*inferior Spiritus operation*]" by which they know something of God's mercy.⁴⁷ Yet Cal-

⁴² See E. David Willis, "The Influence of Laelius Socinus on Calvin's Doctrines of the Merits of Christ and the Assurance of Faith," in *Italian Reformation Studies in Honor of Laelius Socinus*, ed. John A. Tedeschi (Florence: le Monnier, 1965), 231–34. We do not have Socinus's original questions that prompted these responses.

⁴³ *Institutes* III.ii.11 (*OS* iv, 20).

⁴⁴ *Institutes* III.ii.12 (*OS* iv, 22).

⁴⁵ See Krusche, *Wirken*, 249–51.

⁴⁶ For instance, Calvin, being unwilling to separate faith from the Spirit, provides a forced gloss to passages in Scripture (Heb. 6:4–6, Luke 8:13) that indicate temporary faith, explaining that "because the Lord, to render them more convicted and inexcusable, steals into their minds to the extent that his goodness may be tasted without the Spirit of adoption"; *Institutes* III.ii.1.1

⁴⁷ *Institutes* III.ii.11 (*OS* iv, 21). The problem implied by this statement is that it suggests two kinds of work of the Spirit: one in unity with the Word, the other a "lower" work. I return briefly

vin is vague about whether their experience of faith is demonstrably inferior in itself to the true believer's (admittedly weak) faith or is only known to be false by its eventual failure—that is, whether and to what extent those who fell away were hypocrites.⁴⁸ Adding to the confusion, in the course of this passage he suddenly reminds believers to examine themselves, “lest the confidence of the flesh creep in and replace the assurance of faith.” This warning, while realistic, hardly helps to reassure believers that faith once attained will never be lost.⁴⁹ Clearly, the introduction of experience in conjunction with difficult scriptural passages has clouded the initially clear description of faith, which he nevertheless reaffirms in the midst of this difficult discussion: “a knowledge of the divine benevolence toward us and a sure persuasion of its truth” (III.ii.12).

PERSEVERANCE

Contrary to Calvin's intentions, the experience that some fall away could lead one to posit a discontinuity between the phenomenon of justifying faith and the perseverance of the elect. The realm of experience, after all, includes both confirmations of faith and examples of temporary or self-deceived faith. While his primary teaching on perseverance, contrary to the traditional Catholic view that ordinarily the faithful never know for certain the outcome of salvation, is to affirm that the certainty of perseverance is given with faith (III.ii.40), we find Calvin loosening this firm bond within his discussion of election.⁵⁰ Here, turning to the believer's call, he first affirms that the calling in Christ is how the believer knows that God has included her in salvation. The call is twofold: both by the preaching of the Word and

at the conclusion to suggest that negative experience raises important questions for Calvin's doctrine of the Trinity.

⁴⁸ Thus, after drawing a clear distinction between the experience of the elect and reprobate, Calvin adds, “Yet the reprobate are justly said to believe that God is merciful to them, for they receive the gift of reconciliation, although confusedly and not distinctly enough” (*Institutes* III.ii.11). Here and in the sentences following is where experience most smudges the clear lines that Calvin tries to draw.

⁴⁹ However, Calvin consistently associates true faith with “advancing in faith” through self-examination, repentance, and persevering through struggles; see *Institutes* III.ii.12, 40. He never claims that faith is in fact serenely and consistently blissful. Zachman (*Assurance of Faith*, 181–82) is surely correct that Calvin distinguishes genuine faith from temporary faith by the former's conjunction of confidence in God's mercy with awareness of God's wrath on sins. Yet the fact that the question arises shows that phenomenally considered, how believers experience faith at any one time can vary from peace and assurance to fear of God's wrath; this experiential variance remains difficult to reconcile with the definition of faith as “firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence” (*Institutes* III.ii.7).

⁵⁰ Calvin's treatment of this issue in *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God* more clearly shows his indebtedness to Augustine's writings in which perseverance is strictly left up to predestination. See John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, trans. J. K. S. Reid (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1961), 66 (CO 36:268). On perseverance, see Jürgen Moltmann, *Prädestination und Perseveranz: Geschichte und Bedeutung der Reformierten Lehre “de Perseverantia Sanctorum”* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1961).

by the inner illumination of the Spirit (III.xxiv.2); or, what amounts to the same thing: both the general call to all and a special call to those in whom the Spirit makes the Word effective (III.xxiv.8). The call begins with the Word outwardly preached (III.xxiv.2) and is completed by the “secret work of the Spirit” (III.xxiv.13). However much Calvin emphasizes that the decisive “inner call . . . cannot deceive us” (III.xxiv.2), he soon admits that experience, in addition to some scriptures, teaches a different lesson: “Finally, we are taught by this very experience [*ipsa experientia satis docemur*] that call and faith are of little account unless perseverance be added; and this does not happen to all.”⁵¹ This aberrant passage suggests that the inner illumination of the Spirit is not sufficient without a further “gift of perseverance.”⁵² Negative experience seems to be leading Calvin away from the established conjunction of faith and perseverance.

Calvin is aware of the potential this creates for anxiety, and he cites many scriptures to reassure the believer that “Christ has freed us from this anxiety.” Yet he soon adverts again to negative experience: “Yet it daily happens [*At quotidie accidit*] that those who seemed to be Christ’s, fall away from him again. . . .”⁵³ Echoing his reference to the “inferior working of the Spirit” in III.ii.11, Calvin responds by acknowledging that the reprobate sometimes receive similar calls as the elect and are illumined for a time by the Spirit (III.xxiv.8); but he insists that there is finally an intuitable difference between such persons and true believers, who are distinguished by their heartfelt trust in the certainty of their salvation. Such an experiential quality would seem to be necessary to preserve the unity of faith and perseverance. But where this confidence in experience seems tenuous, Calvin characteristically returns to the gospel, as when he bids believers to seek “that sure establishment of election . . . from the word of the gospel” (III.xxiv.7)—referring in particular to texts in which Christ promises to keep until eternity those whom he receives.⁵⁴

The general pattern should by now look familiar: the outer call by the Word is confirmed in the inner call of the Spirit, and yet this inner certainty remains vulnerable to negative experiences that suggest perseverance is contingent upon the secret work of the Spirit. The room for doubt that attends this search for inner certainty can lead the believer back to the grounding in the outer Word, completing the (short) circuit. This pattern parallels what we have already seen in the faith chapter: faith is founded on the gospel Word, sealed by the Holy Spirit in the experienced union with Christ, and

⁵¹ *Institutes* III.xxiv.6 (OS iv, 417). The context refers to Rom. 11:21–23: “For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps he will not spare you,” and so forth.

⁵² See *Institutes* II.iii.11, where Calvin, citing Augustine, is at pains to explain the unity of the grace of perseverance with preceding graces.

⁵³ *Institutes* III.xxiv.7 (OS iv, 418); cf. “*quotidiano usu*” in *Institutes* III.ii.12, cited above.

⁵⁴ In order to undergird the assurance of salvation, Calvin also draws on the so-called *sylogismus practicus*, i.e., the use of good works as evidence of election. See, e.g., *Institutes* III.xiv.18.

yet destabilized by the occasional experience of doubt. A similar circle appeared in the relation of justification and sanctification: the experience of remaining sin evinces the difference of justification and sanctification and the need for continual forgiveness of sins. In each case, experience delineates the a posteriori exceptions to the a priori rule that salvation is confirmed and made steadfast as the believer moves from the outer Word to its inner appropriation.⁵⁵

ELECTION

This distinction between exoteric Word and the secret work of the Spirit becomes particularly acute over the course of Calvin's treatment of election. Experience here more than anywhere yields a wisdom that cautiously peers into God's hidden ways.⁵⁶ Arriving at election, Calvin from the first sentence heralds the subject with an echo of experience: "In actual fact [*Iam vero*], the covenant of life is not preached equally [*aequaliter*] among all men, and among those to whom it is preached, it does not gain the same acceptance either constantly or in equal degree."⁵⁷ He treats the fact that not all receive the preaching of the gospel in III.xxi.5–7, and that not all who hear the gospel accept it in III.xxiv.1–3. In both cases, the principal fact encountered by experience is the absence of equality and the reality of diversity (*diversitas, varietas*); or again, the absence of universality of God's grace and the fact of particularity.⁵⁸ The ordinance of God "has its own equity [*aequitas*]."⁵⁹

Staying with the diversity in the acceptance of the gospel, experience again teaches that Word and Spirit are not always commensurate. To be sure, Calvin reaffirms that the Spirit is the author of scripture (III.xxi.3); but he does not always mean by "Word" simply scripture in general. Rather, it is the "preaching of the gospel" that is contrasted with the gift of the "Spirit of adoption" to those whom the Father chooses.⁶⁰ The "outer Word" is the same Word that Calvin first isolated as the basis for faith in III.ii.7;⁶¹ it is to be distinguished from the Spirit's work in the inner call, without which the

⁵⁵ This pattern explains an observation of Partee ("Calvin and Experience," 174): "Calvin sometimes uses Scripture and experience as opposites and sometimes as complementary."

⁵⁶ Experience also appears several times in Calvin, *Predestination of God*, 57, 96, 104, 158, 185 (CO 36:260, 292, 303, 344, 366). On the experience of God's hiddenness in Calvin, see Gerrish, "To the Unknown God," esp. 144. See also vol. II, 932 n. 4 of the McNeil-Battles edition.

⁵⁷ *Institutes* III.xxi.1 (OS iv, 368); see also III.i.1.

⁵⁸ Note the association of experience with the fact of diversity in *Institutes* III.xxi.6–7, xxii.1, xxiv.12, 15; see also I.xvi.3. Inequality and particularity are also the dual theme of III.xxii.10–11, which to the contrary lacks any mention of experience. The reason, I suspect, is that Calvin is here answering his opponents rather than addressing partisans, and so he restricts himself to purely Scriptural argument.

⁵⁹ *Institutes* III.xxiii.9 (OS iv, 403).

⁶⁰ *Institutes* III.xxiv.1. See also III.xxii.10: "Although the voice of the gospel is addressed to all, the gift of faith is rare."

⁶¹ "We need the promise of grace, which can testify to us that the Father is merciful."

Word cannot have effect. The distinction is illustrated with an unusual metaphor: “in his outward word [*externo verbo*], God may sufficiently witness his secret grace [*occultae . . . gratiae*] to us, provided only the pipe, from which water abundantly flows out for us to drink, does not hinder us from according its due honor to the fountain.”⁶² Calvin’s esteem for the outer Word varies, with this passage marking one of the low points, although even so the Word remains the necessary condition for salvation.⁶³

There is in fact a discursive shift in Calvin—not quite a contradiction—from highlighting the sufficiency of the Word with regards to justification by faith on one side, to the necessity on the other side for the Word to be supplemented by the secret work of the Spirit, a theme developed in the doctrine of election.⁶⁴ Attending to the secret work of the Spirit involves “climbing higher” (*altius conscendere* first in III.i.1 and again in III.xxiv.3). To be sure, Scripture does teach about this secret work of the Spirit, but Calvin seems to assign this knowledge of God a different status from the knowledge of God’s universal offer of mercy in Christ through the outer Word, of which believers can have inwardly a “firm and certain grasp.” In election, by contrast, God “has set forth by his Word the secrets of his will,” those things “which he would have us revere but not understand that through this also he should fill us with wonder” (III.xxi.1).

This contrast between the manifest knowledge from the Word and the secret knowledge from the Spirit carries over to the issue of whether saving grace is given universally or only to some. Calvin, using his method of the “right order of teaching,”⁶⁵ mostly defers deciding on this issue until the doctrine of election. There he responds in the negative to the answer proposed by Melancthon and others: “Some object that God would be contrary to himself if he should universally invite all men to him but admit only a few as elect. . . . Some moderate men speak thus, not so much to stifle the truth as to bar thorny questions” (III.xxii.10). Calvin calls this “a laudable intention” but rejects it with a barrage of scriptures that evince God’s freedom. Admittedly, the view of these moderate men does support “a mutual agreement between faith and the Word,” something commended by Calvin in III.ii. But when forced to choose between the universal offer of salvation received in faith and the particular effectiveness of salvation by God’s will, Calvin makes God’s free election primary: “Indeed, faith is fitly joined to election, provided it [faith] takes second place.” His overall position is subtle and deserves a longer treatment. He tends to stake out a single-minded position on election only in response to direct objections to the doctrine that Calvin sees as biblical, citing scripture and Augustine in his defense.

⁶² *Institutes* III.xxiv.3 (OS iv, 414).

⁶³ Compare the centrality of the Word in *Institutes* III.ii.6 with ii.33 (“Without the illumination of the Holy Spirit, the Word can do nothing”).

⁶⁴ On the “secret” work of God or the Spirit, see *Institutes* III.xxi.1, 3, 6; xxiii.8, 12; xxiv.3, 13.

⁶⁵ On the *recto ordo docendi*, see Muller, *Unaccommodated Calvin*, esp. chap. 7.

Consistent with his order of teaching, he only rarely superimposes election upon the doctrine of justification, despite the ontological priority of the former;⁶⁶ on the other hand, never does he declare God's mercy to be universal. Quite to the contrary, within the doctrine of election Calvin addresses head-on the particularity of God's will, confronting in the process passages that opponents use to argue for the universality of God's saving will. Not surprisingly, experience makes an appearance alongside his citations of scripture: "But experience teaches [*experientia . . . docet*] that God wills the repentance of those whom he invites to himself, in such a way that he does not touch the hearts of all."⁶⁷

FROM LOCI TO THEOLOGICAL STRUCTURE

Driven significantly by the diversity of scriptures, to which he always scrupulously attends, Calvin has assembled a consistent structure that relates the gospel Word and experience in a way that confirms the pattern I initially located in the doctrine of faith and knowledge. To review, the first effect of negative experience was to prove impossible the fulfillment of the Word as law or command. This drives the believer to seek Christ's righteousness in the Word of the gospel, embraced wholeheartedly in the positive experience of the union with Christ through faith. The second effect of experience was to acknowledge that, although the certainty of salvation ought to be secure through faith in Christ, doubt in fact disrupts faith. Faith therefore must remain grounded in the gospel Word *extra nos* and, one should add, directed forward in union with hope to the fulfillment of the Word of promise. The third effect of experience was to acknowledge that justification does not lead immediately to sanctification, even though those two graces are united in Christ, with whom the believer is united in faith. So while faith can and must embrace the Word of forgiveness and reconciliation, the believer remains too mired in sin to fulfill repentance. The fourth effect of experience was to render seemingly indeterminate whether the enjoyment of present faith will persevere until the end. Perseverance is promised in the gospel Word; but in attending to those who have fallen away, negative experience casts doubt on the connection between faith and perseverance. The issue of perseverance

⁶⁶ "Indeed, God declares that he wills the conversion of all, and he directs exhortations to all in common. Yet the efficacy of this depends upon the Spirit of regeneration," given to "whomsoever God wills." This rare foreshadowing of election occurs in *Institutes* III.iii.21, under the doctrine of repentance—not justification. It must be borne in mind, however, that the order of teaching differs in early editions of the *Institutes*. That predestination was previously treated earlier, in conjunction with providence, puts these issues in a different light.

⁶⁷ *Institutes* III.xxiv.15 (*OS* iv, 427). It is also interesting that Calvin, in the midst of the difficulties in accounting for the saying that God "wills all men to be saved" (1 Tim. 2:3–4), concedes that this message is beneficial in a preliminary way for justification: "It is that the consciences of the godly may rest more secure, when they understand there is no difference among sinners provided faith be present" (III.xxiv.17).

leads to the fifth effect of experience, which was to exhibit the inequality in how the gospel is distributed and received among the human race. Since human beings are to be neither simply credited nor wholly blamed for this diversity, it must be attributed on a higher level to the choice of God and the secret work of the Spirit.

On the purely formal level, one finds with each of these five effects a textual marker, most often *experientia* but including a number of other signaling terms: *usor*, *satis notum est*, *videmus*, *quotidie* or *quotidianus*, *debere*, *comperitur*. Furthermore, Calvin often simply insists on matters of experience, rather than arguing for them; one might say its lessons lack a higher principle or are inexplicable. It follows that the truths of negative experience are those whose convicting power depends on their being recognized or internalized personally; these truths must be known and confirmed for oneself.

Materially considered, negative experience reveals what appear to be two strands woven together in Calvin's theology that one can separate only analytically—at the risk of turning an anatomical appreciation of that theology into an autopsy. I have called the primary strand “the gospel,” which stands for the announcement in Scripture, and above all in Christ's atoning sacrifice, of God's free offer of forgiveness to all. One can track in Calvin how, from this announcement of mercy, salvation optimally should follow. Working in unity with the Spirit, the gospel is preached to all and received by all with rejoicing and repentance. All become believers, receive the comfort of God's mercy, and at the same time respond freely with reformed and renewed lives. They can now enjoy positive experiences of God's favor all around them and in their own lives. Through the Spirit they persevere in this faith effortlessly until the end, despite all trials. This hypothetical description of the life of faith, flowing unimpeded from the gospel through the Spirit, is how the world ought to be. The gospel arguably represents the main strand that binds together Calvin's *Institutes* by a synoptic glorification of grace. This same strand also presents a harmonious view of the Trinity: the gospel reveals the mercy of the Father, which is effected universally and without variation by the Holy Spirit. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all share a manifestly united work (I.xiii.18). With a presumption that Calvin would never countenance, we might say that this united work of the Trinity *ad extra* is how God ought to act.

Negative experience is in one sense a second strand woven with the first, but at the same time it represents a contravening element that frays and unravels this main strand, making openings for detours and deviations. We might call negative experience a “controlled deconstruction” of the gospel Word, although it is not always evident that Calvin is in control of negative experience. As signaled in phrases brimming with the happenstance of negative experience, such as “in actual fact,” “it daily happens that,” “experience nevertheless teaches that,” Calvin acknowledges other truths: the gospel is not received equally by all; those who receive it do not steadily maintain their

fidelity nor do they reform their lives as they ought; they do not persevere in faith, apparently because they only seemed to have received the gospel—raising the question of how one can now ever be sure that one has truly believed. Negative experience likewise raises important questions about Calvin's doctrine of the Trinity that require further examination, for it hints at disjunctures alongside the harmonious unity of divine persons considered above. Negative experience, that is, suggests a lack of accord between the open declaration of God's mercy in the Word, the invisible work of the Spirit, and the hidden will of the Father.

While Richard Muller has provided a definitive genetic account of how Calvin arrived at his system in relation to historical precedents and the concerns of his day, Muller's work has only chastened but not obviated the work of others—Bauke, Niesel, Dowey, Parker—who have sought to describe the structure of his theology, even in an occasionally dehistoricized way. The preceding analysis of Calvin's theology into two strands—one that provides unity and stability, the other that departs from or leaves the gospel "stranded" through detours and complications—is a device of significant usefulness in approaching the complex, overdetermined character of what may be anachronistically called the "systematic" character of Calvin's theology. Yet the art of his theology—resulting from the confluence of his own theological and pastoral gifts with the bequest of the other reformers, the broader theological tradition, and above all the pluralistic nature of Scripture—shows itself in the way it weaves these strands together, so that negative experience does not simply disrupt or deconstruct the gospel, but productively opens the Word of the gospel to the subsidiary truths of the intransigent fallenness of the world as well as the mysterious motions of the living God.

Who Is a Beautiful Maiden without Eyes? The Metamorphosis of a Zohar Midrashic Image from a Christian Allegory to a Kabbalistic Metaphor*

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The cultural origins of the medieval Jewish belief in the Shekhinah as an independent feminine divine presence has been the subject of an important scholarly debate in the field of Jewish mysticism during the last decade. At the crux of this debate stands the question concerning the possible influence of the revival of the praxis of devotions to Mary, during the High Middle Ages, on the emergence of the medieval Jewish belief in the Shekhinah as a feminine divine presence. The conclusion that this revival was indeed what influenced the evolution of the Jewish belief in the Shekhinah¹ is supported by the combination of two facts: the lack of any detailed discussions concerning the belief in a feminine divine presence in Jewish sources prior to the twelfth century CE compounded by the fact that at that very same time and in that very same cultural context, Marian worship flourished. Nevertheless, scholars who advanced this

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¹ On the possible influence of Marian devotions on the early kabbalah perceptions of the Shekhinah, see Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess* (New York, 1967), 191–92; Arthur Green, “Shekhinah, the Virgin Mary, and the Song of Songs: Reflection on a Kabbalistic Symbol in Its Historical Context,” *AJS Review* 26 (2002): 1–52; Peter Schäfer, *Mirror of His Beauty: Feminine Images of God from the Bible to Early Kabbalah* (Princeton, NJ, 2002). For a critical approach to this view, see Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros* (New Haven, CT, 2005), 45–49; Yehuda Liebes, “Indeed the Shekhinah a Virgin?: On the Book of Arthur Green” [in Hebrew], *Pe’amim* no. 101–2 (2005): 303–13; Daniel Abrams, *Kabbalistic Manuscripts and Textual Theory: Methodologies of Textual Scholarship and Editorial Practice in the Study of Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem and Los Angeles, 2010), 154–56, and *The Female Body of God in Kabbalistic Literature* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 2004), 41–43.

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claim were not able to point out any direct imprint of the Christian devotions on Jewish theologians and Kabbalists who had, from this period onward, applied themselves to the subject of the Shekhinah. Moreover, according to other scholars, the existence of ancient Near Eastern conceptions of a feminine divinity and late antiquity Gnostic myths concerning feminine deities in the upper world suggests an alternate possibility: that is, that in the Jewish world those beliefs existed and were preserved through oral chains having been committed to writing only in the twelfth century CE. The main purpose of the following article is not to solve this historical and theological dilemma but rather to illuminate the complexity of this subject based on a philological examination of the manner in which a unique Zoharic phrase was formed in the junction between the Christian world in northwest Europe and the Jewish kabbalistic world of the northern Iberian peninsula.

I

One of the most fascinating, well-known, and exhaustively studied images in Zoharic literature is that of the “beautiful maiden,”² which appears in two separate locations in the Zohar pericope named *Sabba de-Mishpatim* (Old man of Mishpatim; hereafter *SdM*). The first occurrence is as part of a rid-

² On *Sabba de-Mishpatim*, the riddle and the parable, see Oded Israeli, *The Interpretation of the Secret and the Secret of Interpretation: Midrashic and Hermeneutic Strategies in Sabba de-Mishpatim of the Zohar* (Los Angeles, 2005); Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York, 1969), 55–56; Elliot R. Wolfson, “Beautiful Maiden without Eyes: ‘Peshat’ and ‘Sod’ in Zoharic Hermeneutics,” in *The Midrashic Imagination: Jewish Exegesis, Thought, and History*, ed. Michael Fishbane (Albany, NY, 1993), 155–203, *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton, NJ, 1994), 384–87, *Circle in the Square: Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Symbolism* (Albany, NY, 1995), 44, 152, and “The Hermeneutic of Visionary Experience: Revelation and Interpretation in the Zohar,” *Religion* 18 (1988): 321–24; Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah New Perspectives* (New Haven, CT, 1988), 227–30, and *Absorbing Perfection: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (New Haven, CT, 2002), 304–5; Yehuda Liebes, “Zohar and Eros” [in Hebrew], *Alpayim* 9 (1994): 87–94, and “Helen’s Porphyry and Kiddush Ha-Shem” [in Hebrew], *Da’at* 57–59 (2006): 99–101; Monique Biber, “Raza de-Eina: A Study in the Secrets of the Eye in the Zohar” [in Hebrew] (MA thesis, Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan), 19–25; Melila Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows from Eden: The Language of Mystical Experience in the Zohar*, trans. Nathan Wolski (Stanford, CA, 2009), 215–28; Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts*, trans. David Goldstein, vol. 3. (London, 1989), 1084–85; Daniel C. Matt, “The Aura of Secrecy in the Zohar,” in *Gershom Scholem’s Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism 50 Years After*, ed. Joseph Dan and Peter Schäfer (Tübingen, 1993), 192–94, and *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, trans. and commentary by Daniel C. Matt, 7 vols. (Stanford, CA, 2004–12), 2:2 and 33–34; Daniel Abrams, “Knowing the Maiden without Eyes: Reading the Sexual Reconstruction of the Jewish Mystic in a Zoharic Parable,” *Da’at* 50–52 (2003): lix–lxxxiii; Pinchas Giller, *Reading the Zohar: The Sacred Text of the Kabbalah* (Oxford, 2001), 35–68; Fischel Lachower, *On the Borderline between the Old and the New* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, 1951), 40–51; Michal Oron, “‘Set Me as a Seal upon Thine Heart’: Studies of the Poetic of the Author of *Sabba de-Mishpatim*,” in *Massu’ot: Studies in Kabbalistic Literature and Jewish Philosophy in Memory of Prof. Ephraim Gottlieb*, ed. Michal Oron and Amos Goldreich (Jerusalem, 1994), 1–24; Frank Talmage, “The Term ‘Haggadah’ in the Parable of the Beloved in the Palace in the Zohar,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 4 (1985): 271–73; Rachel Elior, “Present but

dle in the beginning of *SdM*, and the second is as part of a parable which appears later on in *SdM*.³

Let us begin with the first occurrence. Upon their meeting, the *Sabba* poses a threefold riddle to Rabbi Yose which is articulated as follows:

מאן הוא נחשא דפרח באורא, ואזיל בפירודא, ובין כך ובין כך אית נייחא לחד נמלה דשכיב בין שני, שרי בחבורא וסיים בפירודא.
ומאי איהו נשרא דקא מקננא באילן דלא הוה, בנוי דאתגזלו ולאו מן בריין דאתבריאו באתר דלא אתבריאו.
כד סלקין נחתין, כד נחתין סלקין. תרין דאינון חד, וחד דאינון תלתא.
מהו עולימתא שפירתא ולית לה עינין, וגופא טמירתא ואתגליא, איהי נפקת בצפרא ואתכסיאת ביממא,
אתקשטת בקשוטין דלא הוו.⁴

[Who is a serpent that flies in the air, moving in separation, while an ant lies comfortably between its teeth? Beginning in union, it ends in separation.

Who is an eagle that nests in a tree that never was—its young plundered, though not by created creatures? Ascending, they descend; descending, they ascend. Two who are one, and one who is three.

Who is a beautiful maiden without eyes, her body concealed and revealed, she emerges in the morning and is concealed by day, adorning herself with adornments that are not?⁵]

It is quite conspicuous that these three riddles are of a surrealistic and enigmatic character and that they are imbued with fantastic depictions. The riddles are appealing and intriguing mainly for two reasons: first, because of their surrealistic contents, and second, as a result of the fact that riddles are generally scarce in Zoharic literature. To the best of my knowledge, in the entire Zoharic literature, it is only in *SdM* that this kind of explicit and straightforward riddle can be found, despite the widespread popularity of various genres of riddles in other medieval Jewish sources.⁶

I will attempt to demonstrate that among the three riddles, the one concerning the beautiful maiden without eyes is exceptional both textually and historically. This is evident, first of all, from the words of the Zohar itself as enunciated by R. Yose:

Absent, Still Life and a Pretty Maiden Who Has No Eyes: On the Presence and Absence of Women in the Hebrew Language, in Jewish Culture, and in Israeli Life," in *Streams into the Sea: Studies in Jewish Culture and its Context, Dedicated to Felix Posen*, ed. Rachel Livneh-Freudenthal and Elchanan Reiner (Tel Aviv, 2001), 210.

³ The separation between the two units is to be found in all the Zohar's recensions known to me. See, e.g., Zohar (Mantua ed.), 95a, 99a; Zohar (Cremona ed.), 43a, 45a; Vatican Library, Hebrew Collection: Ms. Heb. Vat. 606, 206r, 212r; New York Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS): Ms. New York JTS 2076, 86r, 91v–92r, and cf. also the earliest manuscript of Cordovero's *Or Yakar* interpretation to *Sabba de-Mishpatim* in Ms. New York JTS 1922 1r–1v, 40v–41r.

⁴ Zohar 2:95a.

⁵ Zohar (Pritzker ed.), 5:2.

⁶ On the medieval Hebrew riddle, see Israel Abrahams, *The Jewish Life in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia 1993), 384–87; Tova Rosen-Moked, "'Testing with Riddles': The Hebrew Riddle of the Middle Ages" [in Hebrew], *Ha-Sifrut* 30–31 (1980): 168–83; Dan Pagis, *Concealed Secret: The History of the Hebrew Riddle in Italy and Holland* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 1986), 16–20. On the similarities between these Zoharic riddles and medieval Hebrew riddles, see Israeli, *The Interpretation of the Secret and the Secret of Interpretation*, 93–97.

Who Is a Beautiful Maiden without Eyes?

אמר רבי יוסי, בכל מלין דשמענא דקאמרת לא תוהגנא אלא מחד [. . .] אמר ההוא סבא ומאן איהי, אמר עולמתא שפירתא. . .⁷

[Rabbi Yose said, "Of all the words I heard you say, I was astonished by only one" . . . the old man said, "And which one is that?" He replied, "A beautiful maiden . . ."]⁸

R. Yose's words seem to reflect a special inclination of the writer or the editor of *SdM* toward the peculiar content of this riddle. It is interesting that this twofold tendency, namely to detach the third riddle from the first two while endeavoring to decode its meanings, seems also to characterize both the traditional commentators of *SdM*⁹ and modern scholars who dealt with this text.¹⁰ Although the inner connection between the three riddles certainly calls for further discussion, this article will, likewise, focus on the riddle of the beautiful maiden.

Only a few pages after the three riddles, we encounter the second occurrence of the image of a "beautiful maiden"¹¹—this time, in the form of a parable about a beloved woman who is concealed in a palace. The description of the relationship of the beloved with her lover is accompanied by an exposition of its meaning relating it to the intimate relations between the Torah and the sages who know her secrets. Since the lesson is fully decoded at the conclusion of the parable, we meet with no difficulty in apprehending the image of the Torah, hiding in her palace and revealing herself through a slit solely to her beloved:

. . . אורייתא מלה נפקא מנרתקה ואתחזיאת זעיר ומיד אתטמרת, הכי הוא ודאי, ובזמנא דאתגליאת מגו נרתקה ואתטמרת מיד, לא עבדת דא אלא לאינון דידעין בה ואשתמודען בה.

מתל למה הדבר דומה, לרחימתא דאיהי שפירתא בחיזו ושפירתא בריוא, ואיהי טמירתא בטמירו גו היכלא דילה, ואית לה רחימא יחידא דלא ידעין ביה בני נשא, אלא איהו בטמירו, ההוא רחימא מגו רחימו דרחים לה, עבר לתרע ביתה תדיר, זקיף עיניו לכל סטר, איהי ידעת דהא רחימא אסחר תרע ביתה תדיר, מה עבדת, פתחת פתחא זעירא בההוא היכלא טמירא דאיהי תמן, וגליאת אנפאה לגבי רחימאה, ומיד אתהדרת ואתכסיאת, כל אינון דהוו לגבי רחימא לא חמו ולא אסתכלו, בר רחימא בלחודוי, ומעוי ולביה ונפשיה אזלו אבתרה, וידע דמגו רחימו דרחימא ליה אתגליאת לגביה רגעא חדא, לאתערא (ס"א לגביה רחימו) ליה.

הכי הוא מלה דאורייתא, לא אתגליאת אלא לגבי רחימאה, ידעת אורייתא דההוא חכימא דלכא אסחר לתרע ביתה כל יומא, מה עבדת, גליאת אנפאה לגביה מגו היכלא, וארמיזת ליה רמיזא, ומיד אהדרת לאתרה ואתטמרת, כל אינון דתמן לא ידעי ולא מסתכלי, אלא איהו בלחודוי, ומעוי ולביה ונפשיה אזיל אבתרה, ועל דא אורייתא אתגליאת ואתכסיאת, ואזלת ברחימו לגבי רחימאה לאתערא בהדיה רחימו.¹²

⁷ Zohar 2:95a.

⁸ Zohar (Pritzker ed.), 5:4, with minor changes from the Pritzker's translation.

⁹ See, e.g., *Mikdash Melekh* (Jerusalem ed.), 111, 115; *Zohar Ha-Raki'a: Bi'or 'al Ha-Zohar Me-Haari z"l* (Sh'ar Ha-Shamaim ed.), 1:69a.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, 141 n. 2; Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:178 n. 270; Yehuda Liebes, "Sections of the Zohar Lexicon" (PhD thesis, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1976), 190, sec. 78; Wolfson, "Beautiful Maiden," 185–87; Abrams, "Knowing the Maiden," lx; Lachower, *On the Borderline*, 41; Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows*, 221.

¹¹ Zohar 2:99a–b. On the other manuscripts see Ms. Heb. Vat. 606, 206r, 212r; Ms. New York JTS 2076, 86r, 91v–92r; and cf. also the earliest manuscript of Cordovero's *Or Yakar* interpretation to *Sabba de-Mishpatim* in Ms. New York JTS 1922 1r–1v, 40v–41r.

¹² Zohar 2:99a.

[... [The] Torah emerges from her sheath, is seen for a moment, then quickly hides away—certainly so, but when she reveals herself from her sheath and quickly hides, she does so only for those who know her and recognize her.

This may be compared to a beloved, beautiful in form and appearance, concealed secretly in her palace. She has a single lover unknown to anyone—except to her, concealedly. Out of the love that he feels for her, this lover passes by her gate constantly, lifting his eyes to every side. Knowing that her lover is constantly circling her gate, what does she do? She opens a little window in that secret palace where she is, reveals her face to her lover, and quickly withdraws, concealing herself. None of those near the lover sees or notices, only the lover, and his inner being and heart and soul follow her. He knows that out of love for him she reveals herself for a moment to arouse him.

So it is with a word of Torah: She reveals herself only to her lover. Torah knows that one who is wise of heart will circle her gate every day. What does she do? She reveals her face to him from the palace and beckons him with a hint, then swiftly withdraws to her place, hiding away. None of those there knows or notices—he alone does, and his inner being and heart and soul follow her. Thus Torah reveals and conceals herself, approaching her lover lovingly to arouse love within him.^{13]}

Most modern scholars have posited a connection between the riddle and the parable without further elucidation or justification of the ensuing disregard of the substantial differences between them.¹⁴ I propose that such a scholarly approach is misguided and, specifically, that this assumed connection is not self-evident or, more accurately, that the parable cannot be automatically considered as a decoding of the riddle. The majority of the traditional Zohar commentators from the sixteenth century on did not tend to make an association between the beautiful maiden of the riddle and that of the parable.¹⁵ They identified the image of “the beautiful maiden without eyes” from the riddle as a symbol of the Shekhinah, while they considered the parable of “the beloved in the palace” to be in line with the explicit explanation in the Zohar itself, as referring to the Torah and the manner in which her secrets are studied.¹⁶ To the best of my knowledge, Oded Israeli is the only scholar who raised and dealt explicitly and extensively with the actual question of the relation between the riddle and the parable. He pro-

¹³ Zohar (Pritzker ed.), 5:33–34, with minor changes from Pritzker’s translation.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, 141 n. 2; Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:178 n. 270; Liebes, “Sections of the Zohar Lexicon,” 190, sec. 78; Wolfson, “Beautiful Maiden,” 185–87; Abrams, “Knowing the Maiden,” ix; Lachower, *On the Borderline*, 41; Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows*, 221.

¹⁵ As far as I know, Cordovero was the only interpreter of the Zohar who refers to an interpretation according to which the two units should be linked insofar as both refer to the soul. However, this is not his own interpretation but one he had heard and that he designates as marginal and unacceptable (Ms. New York JTS 1922 41r). On this matter, cf. also Israeli, *The Interpretation of the Secret and the Secret of Interpretation*, 199.

¹⁶ See, e.g., *Mikdash Melekh* (Jerusalem ed.), 111, 115; *Zohar Ha-Raki’a: Bi’or ‘al Ha-Zohar Me-Haari z”l* (Sh’ar Ha-Shamaim ed.), 1:69a.

posed a connection between these two texts on the basis of two motifs: the beauty of the maiden and her concealment-revelment.¹⁷

The first part of the present study will be devoted to a reexamination of the relations between the riddle of the beautiful maiden without eyes and the parable of the beloved in the palace and will demonstrate the intricate links by which an important representation of the Ecclesia, which was identified with Mary in the High Middle Ages, found its way into the core of the kabbalistic literature. This part of the study will focus on the entangled relations between the riddle and the parable. It will be demonstrated that along with a certain similarity between them, important differences can be detected. These differences are manifest in images, literary-formal aspects and terminology as well as in the manner in which they are integrated into *SdM*. My assertion will be that the scholarly presumption according to which the parable of the beloved in the palace is the solution to the riddle of the maiden without eyes does not conform to the way in which those literary units were formed by the writers or the editors of *SdM*. As we shall see, it appears that the parable preceded the riddle and that some of the expressions included in the riddle were shaped in light of the parable. In its second part, the article will focus on a certain aspect of the Judeo-Christian discourse in northwest Europe that can shed light on the way in which the central image of the riddle, that of a beautiful maiden without eyes, had been formed. It will be demonstrated that this powerful image, which had no parallels in the kabbalistic literature of the thirteenth–fourteenth centuries, probably stems from the famous image of the Jewish Synagoga antithetical to the image of the Mary-Ecclesia and possessing allegorical meanings that were well known to Jews in northwest Europe. The article will conclude with the assertion that the Spanish Kabbalists who wrote or edited *SdM* were unaware of the context from which this image arose and were not familiar with these allegorical meanings of the image of the Synagoga. Therefore, they interpreted the image of the maiden without eyes according to their own comprehension, transforming it from an allegorical image to a riddle of metaphoric character. In this respect, this article, which argues that the image of the blind Shekhinah issued from Ashkenazic Jewish cultural context and was later adopted by the authors or editors of the Zohar in Spain, contributes to the scholarly debate regarding the peregrination of motifs from the Jewish world of French Ashkenazi into the kabbalistic literature in general and specifically into the literature of the Zohar.¹⁸

¹⁷ Israeli, *The Interpretation of the Secret and the Secret of Interpretation*, 198–202.

¹⁸ On this subject see, e.g., Moshe Idel, “Between Ashkenaz and Castile: Incantations, Lists and ‘Gates of Sermons’ in the Circle of Rabbi Nehemia ben Shlomo the Prophet and Their Influences” [in Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 77 (2008): 507–16; Yehuda Liebes, “How the Zohar Was

In order to explain the complexity of connections between the riddle of the beautiful maiden without eyes and the parable of the beloved in the palace, I will begin with a survey of the most prominent differences between them.

As Yehuda Liebes has noted,¹⁹ the parable of the beloved in the palace is a poetic acme of Zoharic literature, and it can be said that it iterates in a succinct manner some of the founding principles of the spirit of this literature. It is perhaps due to this that this parable has won more attention in discussions, analyses, and mention in scholarship than any other kabbalistic text of the same period.²⁰ The parable and its meaning impressively reflect the complex intricacies of the spiritual, erotic, and hermeneutic relationship between the Kabbalist and the Torah, and it can be asserted that this parable of the beloved in the palace is not only an organic part of the Zoharic literature but is one of its pinnacles.

As opposed to the parable of the beloved in the palace, it seems that the riddle of the beautiful maiden without eyes is foreign to the kabbalistic world in general and specifically to the Castilian kabbalah. Blindness in the Castilian kabbalah does not have any positive connotation. Unlike some well-known literary works in which blindness may be a positive image or receive a positive role—as, for example, the blindness of Tiresias, the prophet of Apollo, which signifies his ability to reveal the secrets of the Gods—blindness in the Castilian kabbalistic literature follows the common Judeo-Christian trope bearing the negative meaning according to which a blind person cannot see the theological truth.²¹ An example of this can be found

Written,” in *Studies in the Zohar* (New York, 1993), 85–138; Israel M. Ta-Shma, *Ha-Nigle She-Banistar: The Halachic Residue in the Zohar* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, 2001), 25–50, and “Additional Inquiries into the Problem of Ashkenazi Sources to the Zohar” [in Hebrew], *Kabbalah* 5 (2000): 253–58; R. Meroz, “Zoharic Narratives and Their Adaptations,” *Hispania Judaica Bulletin* 3 (2001): 25–26 n. 85; Ephraim Kanarfogel, *Peering through the Lattices: Mystical, Magical, and Pietistic Dimensions in the Tosafist Period* (Detroit, 2000); Judith Weiss, “The Two Zoharic Versions of the Legend of the Tanna and the Deadman” [in Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 78 (2009): 524–54.

¹⁹ Liebes, “Zohar and Eros,” 94–98; Israeli, *The Interpretation of the Secret and the Secret of Interpretation*, 193.

²⁰ On *Sabba de-Mishpatim*, the riddle, and the parable, see Israeli, *The Interpretation of the Secret and the Secret of Interpretation*; Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, 55–56; Wolfson, “Beautiful Maiden,” 155–203, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, 384–87, *Circle in the Square*, 44, 152, and “The Hermeneutic of Visionary Experience,” 321–24; Idel, *Kabbalah New Perspectives*, 227–30, and *Absorbing Perfection*, 304–5; Liebes, “Zohar and Eros,” 87–94, and “Helen’s Porphyry and Kiddush Ha-Shem,” 99–101; Biber, *Raza de-Eina*, 19–25; Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows*, 215–28; Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, 3:1084–85; Matt, “The Aura of Secrecy in the Zohar,” 192–94, and *Zohar* (Pritzker ed.), 2:33–34; Abrams, “Knowing the Maiden,” lix–lxxxiii; Giller, *Reading the Zohar*, 35–68; Lachower, *On the Borderline*, 40–51; Oron, “Set Me as a Seal upon Thine Heart,” 1–24; Talmage, “The Term ‘Haggadah’ in the Parable of the Beloved in the Palace in the Zohar,” 271–73; Elior, “Present but Absent, Still Life and a Pretty Maiden Who Has No Eyes,” 210.

²¹ For a recent work on this matter, see Edward Wheatley, *Stumbling Blocks before the Blind: Medieval Constructions of a Disability* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2010), 63–89.

in the next passage from pericope *VaYese* of the Mantua Zohar. In this passage, the Torah calls everyone to read her concealed meanings. However, the majority of the people, who are described as “closed-hearted and shut-eyed,” remain blind to her appeal:

כמה אית לן לאסתכלא במלי דאורייתא ווי לון לאינון אטימי לבא וסתימין עיינין הא אורייתא קארי קמיהו (משלי ט') לכו לחמו בלחמי ושתו ביין מסכתי, מי פתי יסור הנה חסר לב אמרה לו ולית מאן דישגח.²²

[How intensely we should contemplate words of Torah! Woe to the close-minded, close-hearted, and shut-eyed! Look, Torah proclaims before them: “Come, eat of my bread! Drink of the wine I have mingled! Whoever is simple, turn in here!” She says to those devoid of sense (Proverbs 9: 4–5). But no one pays attention!²³]

Unlike the laypeople who are “closed-hearted and shut-eyed” (אטימי לבא) (וסתימין עיינין) the sages, who can see the concealed meanings of the Torah, are described as “The wise who are full of eyes” (חכימין דאינון מליין עיינין). In this respect, we find in *SdM* that the sages’ ability to understand the secrets that God concealed within the Torah is a result of having their eyes open to that which is beyond the cloaked literary meanings of the verses:

קודשא בריך הוא כל מלין סתימין דאיהו עביד עאל לון באורייתא קדישא, וכלא אשתכח באורייתא, והיא מלה סתימא גלי לה אורייתא, ומיד אתלבשא בלבושא אחרא, ואתטמר תמן ולא אתגלי, וחכימין דאינון מליין עיינין, אף על גב דהיא מלה אסתים בלבושה (תמן), חמאן לה מגו לבושה, ובשעתא דאתגלי היא מלה עד לא תיעול בלבושה, רמאן בה פקיהו דענא, ואף על גב דמיד אסתים, לא אתאביד מעיניהו.²⁴

[All concealed things that the blessed Holy One does He placed within the holy Torah; all is found there. That concealed matter is revealed by Torah, and immediately clothed in another garment, hidden there and not revealed. The wise who are full of eyes—although that matter is concealed there in its garment—see it through the garment. And when that matter is revealed, before entering its garment, they cast an open eye upon it; although immediately concealed, it is not lost to their sight.²⁵]

The only depiction of a figure without eyes that I could find in the kabbalistic literature of the period is that of “blind dragon,” a demonic creature that acts as an intermediary in the coupling of Lilith and Samael as described by R. Yitzhak Ben Yaakov Hacohen:

... והתנין של מעלה הוא שר סומא, שהוא כדמיון שושבין אמצעי בין סמאל וילית ושמו תנינעור. ובעלי קבלה אמרו, כי אותו התנין שבים בלי עינים, וכן התנין של מעלה כדמות צורות רוחניות²⁶ בלי גוונים שם העינים ונקרא

²² Zohar 1:165a; and cf. 1:28a, 1:62a, 1:68a, 3:74a 3:77a 3:222a.

²³ Zohar (Pritzker ed.), 2:423.

²⁴ Zohar 2:98b. On this motif see also Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows*, 225–28; Israeli, *The Interpretation of the Secret and the Secret of Interpretation*, 194, 200–201, 226–31; Wolfson, “Beautiful Maiden,” 169–70, 185–86, and *Through a Speculum That Shines*, 385.

²⁵ Zohar (Pritzker ed.), 5:30.

²⁶ In R. Elazar of Worms’s interpretation to the prayer book (*Siddur*), one finds the following tradition according to which “The ministering angels have no eyes but only wings” (*The Rokeach’s Commentary on the Sidur*, Shofarot, 680). It seems that R. Yitzhak b. Ya’akov referred here to this tradition.

אצל המקובלים בריה שאין לה עינים על כן שמו תנינעור כמו תנין עור והוא המחבר הלווי והזווג בין סמאל ובין לילית.²⁷

[and the Upper Dragon is a blind prince, who is like an intermediary between Samael and Lilith and his name is "Blindragon." And the sages of the kabbalah said that [just as] the dragon in the sea has no eyes, similarly the Upper Dragon, in the image of spiritual forms, is without shades [which are] named eyes. And he is called by the Kabbalists "a creature that has no eyes." Hence his name is "Blindragon," that is: blind dragon. It is he who joins, as escort and matchmaker, Samael and Lilith.]

The description of the dragon as blind, *Suma* (סומא), is not surprising given its similarity to the name of his lord Samael (סמאל). The tension between the eyes and the lack of eyes is like the tension between knowledge and justice on the one hand and ignorance and evil on the other. It can, therefore, be stated that in the Zohar and in the literature of the kabbalah of the late middle ages, the symbolic meanings of the motif of the closed eyes and blindness is essentially negative—whether as a demonic image or as an expression of removal from the understanding of the secret world. It is, therefore, strange and alien to the Zohar that the description of "the beautiful maiden without eyes" would be appropriated as a representation of a positive image, whether of the Shekhinah, the Torah, or the soul.

This anomaly prompted Yehuda Liebes, in his *Dictionary of the Zohar*, to present two explanations that are consonant with its Zoharic context. According to the first, what is actually intended is a beautiful maiden who is not looked at, as is the case of the beloved in the parable of "the beloved in the palace."²⁸ The second explanation ensues from the mythical description presented in the words of R. Yitzhak b. Ya'akov regarding the blind dragon cited above. Based on this paragraph, Liebes interprets the word "eyes" (עיינין) as shades and therefore suggests that the maiden in the riddle is not blind but has no tints.²⁹ Both explanations proposed by Liebes solve difficulties in the understanding of the nature of this expression, its Zoharic context, and the relation between the riddle and the parable. Nonetheless, there remains an important question that is left unsolved, and that is, why do we not find any similar expressions or articulations connected to blindness or lack of eyes in regard to the Torah or the Shekhinah in the kabbalistic literature of that period? In addition, it seems that these important

²⁷ *Maamar 'al Ha-Ašilot Ha-Smalit* (Scholem ed.), 100–101/23 in Gershom Scholem, "The Kabbalah of R. Yitzhak and R. Ya'akov, Sons of R. Ya'akov Ha-Cohen," *Jewish Studies* 2 (1927): 262–63. On a similar image, see *S'ar Ha-Razim* (Oron ed.), 65, 262–63. And see also Liebes, "Sections of the Zohar Lexicon," 190, sec. 78; Wolfson, "Beautiful Maiden," 185.

²⁸ Elliot Wolfson explained the difficulties in this interpretation: "The difficulty with this explanation [i.e. that the beautiful maiden cannot be seen Tz. W.] is a philological one, for the actual expression is that the maiden has no eyes. This implies that she cannot see, not that she cannot be seen" (Wolfson, "Beautiful Maiden,"), 186.

²⁹ Liebes, "Sections of the Zohar Lexicon," 190, sec. 78.

suggestions that Liebes proposes regarding the interpretation of the expression ignore its distinctly visual character. It is worthy of note that Zohar commentators from the sixteenth century on accepted the visual description as is and indeed discussed the Shekhinah simply as having no eyes, or as blind on the basis of the interpretation of the image of the maiden as signifying the Shekhinah.³⁰ In this connection, one finds from the sixteenth century on rituals and kabbalistic intentions that are based on the visual description of the maiden without eyes.³¹

The riddle and the parable differ in their terminology specifically in regard to the key word that is supposed to connect them: while the heroine of the riddle is termed "maiden" (עולימתא), in the center of the parable stands the word "beloved" (רחימתא). These are, of course, close expressions, but they point to a conceptual rather than a textual proximity. From a philological point of view, it is very difficult to assume that the parable was created as a solution to the riddle, or was in point of fact under its influence, because the word *'ulimta* (maiden), which is supposed to link the riddle and the parable, is not mentioned in the parable even once.

From the literary-structural point of view, the endeavor to establish a direct connection between the riddle and the parable, regarding the parable as a solution to the riddle, is nonviable. The parable is a closed unit that stands by itself and has a clear structure: introduction, parable, moral, and then a detailed hermeneutic discussion as a summary. Moreover, the parable unit offers a moral that is overt and directly related to the parable within it. Therefore, it does not seem plausible to suppose that the parable depends on or evolves from any source external to it or that it alludes to or addresses the riddle in any way.

Finally, an examination of the general value structure of *SdM* does not suggest any affinity between the parable and the riddle. In those manuscripts known to me,³² the riddle and the parable are separated by long and detailed sections. It appears that not one of the writers, editors, or scribes of the Zohar saw any reason to indicate any connection between them.

³⁰ In this respect, the words: "A beautiful maiden without eyes" were interpreted in Zohar Ha-Raki'a: "and the Sabba referred to the secret that was implied by that to Raḥel who is 'a beautiful maiden etc.' in the secret of 'Raḥel was beautiful and well favoured' (Gen. 29, 17), and she does not have eyes, since the eyes were not mentioned, but only the eyes of Leah were mentioned in the secret of 'Leah was tender eyed'" (ibid.) (*Zohar Ha-Raki'a: A Commentary on the Zohar from the Ari z"l*, 1:69a).

³¹ In this manner one finds in *Sha'ar Ha-Kavanot*: "Before saying *Shm' Israel* close your eyes with your right hand and concentrate on that which was written in Sabba de-Mishpatim: 'a beautiful maiden without eyes'" (*Sha'ar Ha-Kavanot, keriat shm'*, 135). For more about rituals and concentrations referring to those words, see Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, 141.

³² See above Zohar (Mantua ed.), 95a, 99a; Zohar (Cremona ed.), 43a, 45a; Ms. Heb. Vat. 606, 206r, 212r; Ms. New York JTS 2076, 86r, 91v–92r and cf. also the earliest manuscript of Cordovero's *Or Yakar* interpretation to *Sabba de-Mishpatim* in Ms. New York JTS 1922 1r–1v, 40v–41r.

III

Along with the clear differences between the parable and the riddle, there also exist points of similarity that are of importance. As we have already noted, there is a thematic similarity that cannot be attributable to the terminological differences: in the riddle there is “a beautiful maiden” (עולימתא שפירתא) and in the parable there is a “beloved, beautiful in form and appearance” (רחימתא דאיהי שפירתא בחיזו ושפירתא בריוא). Nevertheless, such a connection can be gleaned in my opinion from another motif that appears in both riddle and parable, namely, the description of those beautiful women in both units as concealed and revealed. In this case the similarity is manifest on the descriptive as well as on the terminological level: in the riddle one finds that the maiden’s body is “concealed and revealed” (טמירתא ואתגליא), and in the parable the beloved is “concealed secretly in her palace” (איהי טמירתא בטמירו גו) (היכלא דליה). Later on, when she is revealed to her beloved she is described in these words: “She opens a little window in that secret palace where she is, reveals her face to her lover” (פתחת פתחא זעירא בההוא היכלא טמירא דאיהי תמן, וגליאת) (אנפהא לגבי רחימאה). In this case, it is, in fact, the terminological criterion that leads us to make a connection between the riddle and the parable. In light of the complex relations between the riddle and the parable, which include essential differences along with hints of connection between them, I propose in what follows an account that may clarify the way in which both were crystallized and integrated in the framework of *SdM*.

IV

As stated above, the expression “a beautiful maiden without eyes” has no parallel in the kabbalistic literature of the period. I suggest that a better understanding of its meaning can be achieved in the context of the medieval Christian world of imagery and more specifically in reference to the imagery of the Synagoga as it was designed in the Christian art of that period. It is known that from the ninth century on, in Christian art it was common to represent the Ecclesia and the Synagoga as mirror images.³³ Nevertheless, beginning in the twelfth century CE, some changes occurred in the manner in which these artistic images were represented. First, from this period on we find that the Synagoga is blindfolded, a sign of her blindness and her

³³ These motifs are well known in the scholarly literature and I will refer here only to the most important ones: Paul Weber, *Geistliches Schauspiel und Kirchliche Kunst in ihrem Verhältnis erläutert an einer Ikonographie der Kirche und Synagoge* (Stuttgart, 1894); Wolfgang S. Seiferth, *Synagogue and Church in the Middle Ages: Two Symbols in Art and Literature*, trans. Lee Chadeayne and Paul Gottwald (New York, 1971); Bernhard Blumenkranz, *Le Juif médiéval au miroir de l'art chrétien* (Paris, 1966); Heinz Schreckenberg, *The Jews in Christian Art: An Illustrated History* (New York, 1996), 16–18 and 31–65.

inability to see the truth.³⁴ Second, in the first quarter of the thirteenth century, with the establishment of churches in the Gothic style, one notes the prominent location of sculptures of the Ecclesia and the Synagoga at the entrance to churches (fig. 1). In other words, as opposed to the prevalent ninth-century artistic convention, from the twelfth century on, figures of the Ecclesia and the Synagoga were displayed independently as distinct and large figures and were no longer relegated to be solely elements of the artistic expositions, reliefs, or drawings, primarily describing the crucifixion. The composition of the sculptures endowed the depicted female figures with a dynamic presence, clearly expressed in the outline of their bodies, their clothing, and their ornaments. Moreover, the location of the impressive sculptures of the Ecclesia and the Synagoga at the entrances of churches had the effect of displaying them in this public domain to be seen by all, Christians and non-Christians alike.³⁵ Third, this change was expressed not only in the artistic medium and its accessibility to the wider public but also in the way in which these figures were represented. At this time, the Synagoga had begun to be depicted according to Gothic artistic conventions as a tall, noble, and beautiful woman having body contours and facial outlines and features almost identical to the Ecclesia. Hence, the two are differentiated and opposed by characteristics other than their beauty. In contrast to the Ecclesia, who is erect, dressed with indications of royalty such as a crown and cape, and whose eyes are wide open, the Synagoga lowers her gaze, the ten commandments are shown to be slipping out of her hands, and she is depicted as having been divested of those signs of royalty that had characterized her in the past because her crown is fallen, her cape is worn, and her sword or banner is broken. Finally, the Synagoga is prevented from seeing the truth as her eyes are bound.³⁶

In conclusion, I suggest that from the thirteenth to the mid-fourteenth centuries it is possible to see in northwest Europe many and new representations of the figures of the Synagoga and the Ecclesia that were made con-

³⁴ See, e.g., Seiferth, *Synagogue and Church*, 90. It seems that this allegorical meaning was based on the second Corinthians (3:13–16) in which we find: “We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to prevent the Israelites from seeing the end of what was passing away / But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away / Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts / But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.”

³⁵ On this see, for example, Nina Rowe, “Idealization and Subjection at the South Façade of Strasbourg Cathedral,” in *Beyond the Yellow Badge: Anti-Judaism and Antisemitism in Medieval and Early Modern Visual Culture*, ed. Mitchell B. Merback (Leiden, 2007), 179–202; Sara Offenberg, “Expressions of Meeting the Challenges of the Christian Milieu in the Medieval Jewish Art and Literature” [in Hebrew] (PhD thesis, Ben Gurion University, Beer Sheva, 2008), 22–26, 47.

³⁶ Based on the verses from Lamentations 5:15–17: “The joy of our heart is ceased; our dance is turned into mourning / The crown is fallen from our head: woe unto us, that we have sinned / For this our heart is faint; for these things our eyes are dim.”



FIG. 1.—The Ecclesia and the Synagoga from the Strasbourg Cathedral. The photographs were taken by Dr. Sara Offenberg. I would like to thank her for her kind permission to publish them.

spicuous in the public domain and in which both were depicted as beautiful women.³⁷ The Synagoga was differentiated from the Ecclesia mainly by her blindness, her lowered gaze, and the usurpation of vestiges of royalty. A paraphrase of the words of the riddle in the Zohar could be formulated as follows: there is a beautiful maiden, dressed in royalty and seeing the truth,

³⁷ On this matter see, for example, Rowe, "Idealization and Subjection," 181; Seiferth, *Synagogue and Church*, 111–17.

and as opposed to her there is a beautiful maiden whose vestiges of royalty have been usurped and she is unable to see as her eyes are bound (fig. 2).

The similarity between these characteristics of the sculptures of the Synagoga in the thirteenth–fourteenth centuries and the description of the maiden in the riddle is very significant. In addition, the adoption of Christian visual imagery by Jews is not surprising and is obvious in many Jewish works of art that were created in the Ashkenazi-French region between the second quarter of the thirteenth century and the mid-fourteenth century.³⁸

A unique example, which is also quite relevant to our subject, is to be found in *Mahzor Levy*, which was written in the first third of the fourteenth century. In this manuscript, there appears a drawing of a bride and a groom: the groom represents the God of Israel wearing a hat that was singularly Jewish—*Judenhut*. The bride, representing Keneset Israel, is described as seated on a chair draped in a cape with a crown on her head similar to depictions of Mary or Ecclesia in Christian illustrations of the Song of Songs of that period. On the other hand, one can note that the female figure is blindfolded, a motif that was obviously borrowed from the representation of the Synagoga in Christian art. There is nothing in these words that is meant to suggest or imply that either the motif of the maiden with no eyes that was adapted to the Zoharic riddle or the illustration from *Mahzor Levy* were inspired by each other or a common third source. Rather, it is suggested that both express the same spirit, which adopts a negative Christian motif of Keneset Israel while at the same time does not abstain from ascribing to Keneset Israel positive motifs that in the Christian world were attributed to Mary-Ecclesia.³⁹

v

At this point, I would like to return to *SdM* and its cryptic-metaphoric depiction of the beautiful maiden. As I have argued above, there exists a firm foundation to assume that the expression “a beautiful maiden without eyes . . . adorning herself with adornments that are not” is of Christian origin. Contrary to the Iberian Peninsula, where these images of the Synagoga and the Ecclesia were not exhibited in the public realm and therefore were

³⁸ On the meanings and the ways in which these motifs were adopted in Jewish art, see, for example, Shalom Sabar, “The Fathers Slaughter their Sons: Depictions of the Binding of Isaac in the Medieval Ashkenaz,” *Image 3* (2009): 9–27; Sarit Shalev-Eyni, “Iconography of Love: Illustrations of Bride and Bridegroom in Ashkenazi Prayerbooks of the Thirteenth and the Fourteenth Centuries,” *Studies in Iconography* 26 (2005): 27–57; Ruth Mellinkoff, *Antisemitic Hate Signs in Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts from Medieval Germany* (Jerusalem, 1999); Offenberger, *Expressions of Meeting*, 56–74.

³⁹ On the adaptation of representations of Mary-Ecclesia in Jewish illustrations from the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries see, for example, Shalev-Eyni, “Iconography of Love.” On the motif of the crown in these illustrations, see Naomi Feuchtwanger, “The Coronation of the Virgin and the Bride,” *Jewish Art* 12–13 (1989): 213–24.

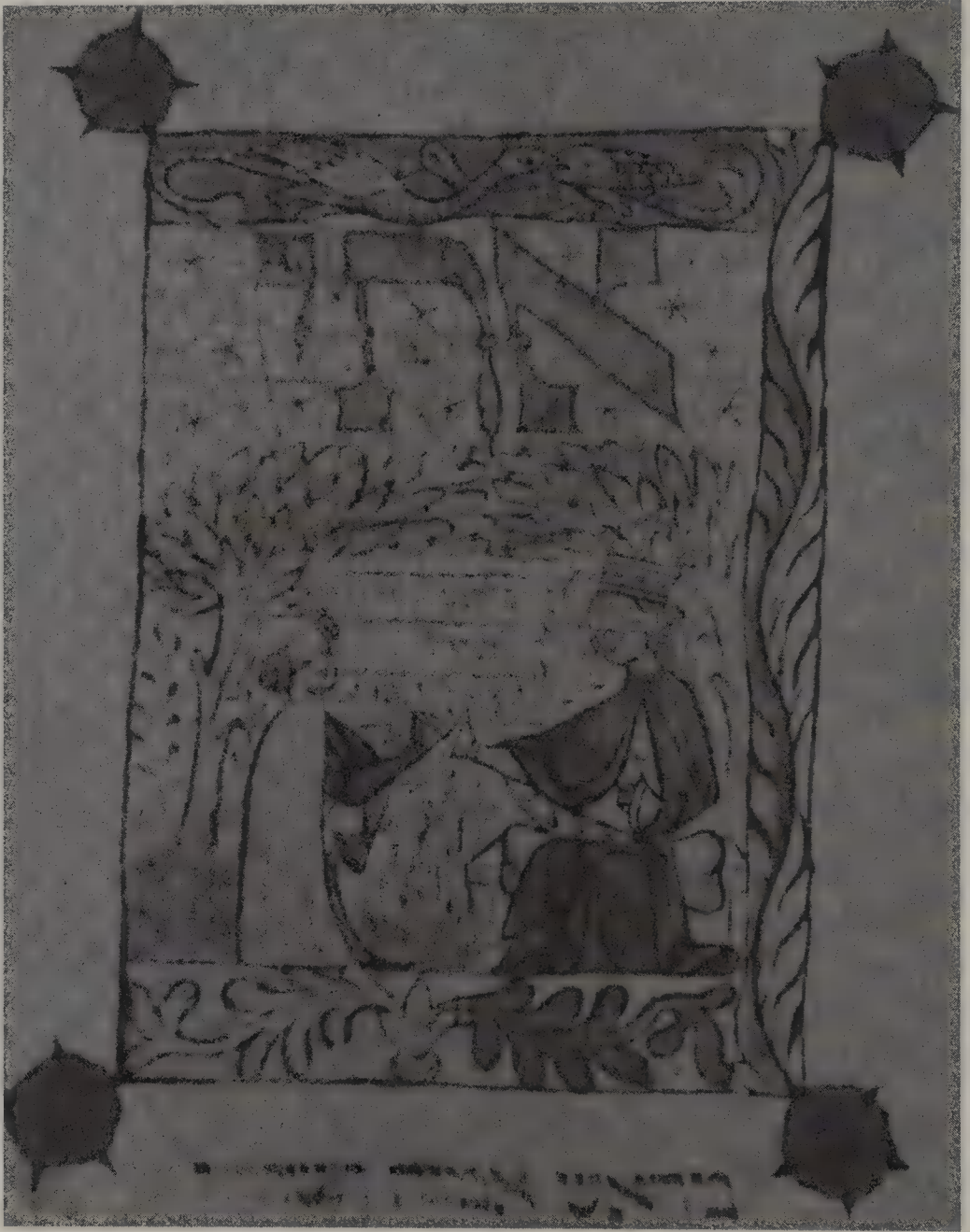


FIG. 2.—Illustration from Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek, Hamburg, Cod. Levy 37, 169r. I would like to thank the Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek in Hamburg for permission to publish this illustration.

probably unknown to Jews who lived there,⁴⁰ in the Asheknazy Jewish world such an expression was certainly not unusual in reference to the larger cultural context in which they lived. When this expression reached the Kabba-

⁴⁰ A survey list of the sculptures as well as other representations of the Ecclesia and the *Synagoga* from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries which are known today can be found in Rowe, "Idealization and Subjection," 183 n. 13.

lists in the Iberian Peninsula, they were impressed by its strangeness and poetic strength,⁴¹ while not comprehending its allegorical significance since they were not acquainted with the Ecclesia and the Synagoga statues in the Christian art. They therefore interpreted this image in a metaphorical manner that does not refer to a specific representation of a denotative nature but rather represents a wide range of connections and is mainly connotative. As such, this expression suited the literary aims of the creators of *SdM*, and it was interwoven with other visual imagery as part of the surrealistic riddles put in the mouth of the grandfather. To return to one of the questions with which we began, we can now say that the extrinsic origin of the expression “a beautiful maiden without eyes” accounts for the fact that we do not find any other parallels in the kabbalistic literature of the period. The reason for this is that this expression does not belong to the kabbalistic context whose center was in the north of the Iberian Peninsula. This image is not part of the semantic fields and symbolic meanings that are connected to the Shekhinah, the Torah, or the soul in kabbalistic literature. Nevertheless, this image did penetrate into *SdM* in the form of a riddle perhaps due to its poetic power. If this be the case, it may serve to clarify the curious attitude of R. Yose who, as we noted in the beginning of the article, was so deeply impressed by it and that he detached it from the two other riddles. Hence, the riddle of the beautiful maiden is distinguished by its very origin from the parable of “the beloved in the palace,” which had evolved quite naturally from the kabbalistic context that had developed in the north of the Iberian Peninsula. The articulation of the system of relations between the Kabbalist and the Torah on the erotic and hermeneutical levels⁴² as imparted in the parable is integral to the kabbalistic context of the book of Zohar.

In light of the findings presented above, I wish to reexamine the structure of the riddle of “the beautiful maiden with no eyes” and the way in which it was formed. Contrary to the common opinion in scholarship that sees the parable as an attempt to interpret or enlarge upon the riddle, it now appears that the riddle was formed under the influence of the parable and not other-

⁴¹ As the Zohar says explicitly: “Rabbi Yose said, ‘Of all the words I heard you say, I was astonished by only one. Either you said it out of foolishness, or they are empty words.’ The old man said, ‘And which one is that?’ He replied, “A beautiful maiden etc.” (Zohar, 2:95a translation: Zohar [Pritzker ed.], 5:4).

⁴² On this see Israeli, *The Interpretation of the Secret and the Secret of Interpretation*; Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, 55–56; Wolfson, “Beautiful Maiden,” 155–203, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, 384–87, *Circle in the Square*, 44, 152, and “The Hermeneutic of Visionary Experience,” 321–24; Idel, *Kabbalah New Perspectives*, 227–30, and *Absorbing Perfection*, 304–5; Liebes, “Zohar and Eros,” 87–94, and “Helen’s Porphyry and Kiddush Ha-Shem,” 99–101; Biber, *Raza de-Eina*, 19–25; Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows*, 215–28; Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, 3:1084–85; Matt, “The Aura of Secrecy in the Zohar,” 192–94, and Zohar (Pritzker ed.), 2:33–34; Abrams, “Knowing the Maiden,” lix–lxxxiii; Giller, *Reading the Zohar*, 35–68; Fischel Lachower, *On the Borderline* 40–51; Oron, “Set Me as a Seal upon Thine Heart,” 1–24; Talmage, “The Term ‘Haggadah’ in the Parable of the Beloved in the Palace in the Zohar,” 271–73; Elior, “Present but Absent, Still Life and a Pretty Maiden Who Has No Eyes,” 210.

wise. At the outset, this expression, which included four motifs—that is, the maiden, her blindness, her beauty, and her ornaments—seems to have been familiar to Jews in northwest Europe who encountered this image in Christian art that was presented in the public domain. In its second stage, this description found its way to the writer or the redactor of *SdM*, who was ignorant of its specific attire in Christian art as the Ecclesia and the Synagoga, and he consequently adopted this expression into his world by adding to it that cryptic-metaphoric level.

In conclusion, it can be stated that the dilemma concerning the possible influence of theological and sociological vicissitudes that occurred in Western Europe during the High Middle Ages on substantial themes in the Jewish mystical literature of that period will most probably continue to engage the scholarship of Jewish mysticism in the future. The purpose of this article was to demonstrate that the Zoharic riddle about “a beautiful maiden without eyes” originated in the Christian mirror images of Ecclesia-Synagoga. Nevertheless, this Zoharic reference seems to indicate no awareness of the cultural origins and the allegoric meaning of this image in the Christian art and theology. As such, this study does not pretend to solve the issue of Christian influence on the image of the Shekhinah in Jewish mystical literature but rather contributes to the realization of its complexity.

Review Article

Islam in America*

Jane I. Smith / Harvard Divinity School

It has been my pleasure to read these three recent books on Islam in the American context. While all three deal historically with aspects of the same general theme, they differ markedly in style, purpose, and intended audience. I am happy to recommend all three for the appropriate readers.

The first, and shortest, of the three is Edward E. Curtis IV's *Muslims in America*. Just over 100 pages in length, this interestingly presented "short history," as it styles itself, covers the span of time from the slave trade starting in the mid-eighteenth century to the various Muslim communities visible in the United States in the decade after the attacks of 9/11. Curtis's style allows the reader to see the development of Islam in the United States from the perspective of the players who have constructed that history. Curtis acknowledges that he is not dealing with issues of anti-Muslim prejudice, especially as exhibited in the past decade, but rather presents a collage of stories about African Americans and immigrants from various places in the world that offers a living picture of American Islam. Each of the book's five chapters ends with a brief biography, personalized memoir, or an excerpt from a newspaper or journal article taken from the relevant time period that allows the reader to experience the development of Islam in as subjective a way as possible. Curtis's volume is enjoyable reading and is written, as he says, "so that non-Muslim Americans can come to understand Muslim Americans just a little bit better" (xi).

Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, in *A History of Islam in America*, offers his audience a quite different reading experience. The book is long and fully packed, with eight comprehensive chapters and nearly 400 pages of text. His professed motive in writing this book, however, overlaps in an interesting way with one of Curtis's stated intentions, namely, to show how events in the history of the United States have affected American Muslim life.

* Edward E. Curtis IV, *Muslims in America: A Short History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 144 pp., \$12.95; Thomas S. Kidd, *American Christians and Islam: Evangelical Culture and Muslims from the Colonial Period to the Age of Terrorism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 201 pp., \$31.95; Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 446 pp., \$28.99.

GhaneaBassiri states in his introduction that most Western scholarship on Islam in America has gone with the assumption that there is an essential difference between Islam and “the West” and that it has concentrated on the experience of Muslims in the United States rather than their active participation in the history that has made America what it is. GhaneaBassiri includes in his genial accusation the work of several scholars who have written recently on Islam in America (specifically John Esposito, Yvonne Haddad, Jocelyne Cesari, and myself). He also specifically cites several authors who he says have countered the predominant trend, including Bruce Lawrence and, interestingly, Edward Curtis. GhaneaBassiri insists that his argument applies to African Americans as well as immigrant Muslims. Appreciating the necessity of acknowledging the personal experiences of Muslims in America, he nonetheless argues that “this methodology stymies the self-reflexivity needed for critical analysis” (7).

Ironically, says GhaneaBassiri, by privileging Muslim voices, as many of us have done, we actually perpetuate the reification of Islam and America as mutually exclusive categories. I for one am happy to credit his point, and I enjoy the way he organizes his thorough historical investigation in such a way as to demonstrate the interplay of American experience and the way Muslims both have been affected by it and have participated in its formation.

The third book in the trilogy I have been asked to review is Thomas S. Kidd’s *American Christians and Islam: Evangelical Culture and Muslims from the Colonial Period to the Age of Terrorism*. Kidd is well known to students of the history of Christian attitudes toward Islam, especially in the Western context. This work provides a kind of mirror image to Curtis and GhaneaBassiri by reflecting what American Christians, particularly Evangelicals, have thought and written about Islam and Muslims from the earliest days of their presence here. He echoes the theme of mutual influence in his recognition that Christian attitudes actually affect the sense of self-identification of Muslims and, therefore, their actions. He pays less attention, perhaps because there is little to say on the subject, to how Christians have taken into account Islam, both its teachings and the actions of its adherents, in their own reflections on American Christianity. Kidd is clear to self-identify as a Christian, but at the same time he distances himself as a scholar striving for objectivity from the series of Evangelical Christian responses that he reports in his book. In 170 pages Kidd makes use of a great variety of source materials, including missionary memoirs, popular eschatological writings, conversion narratives, and post-9/11 tracts reflecting what is commonly called “Islamophobia.”

Together these three works take into account at least four constituent elements that must be considered, if not balanced, when looking at American Islam. (1) What has happened, and is happening, to the country itself, as it professes to be a land where immigrants are welcomed and whites and blacks together share the melting pot? (2) What has been the experience of

American Muslims over the many decades of their participation in American society, and how has it both been influenced by and, in turn, influenced the development of the country? (3) How have Americans viewed, and how do they now view, Muslims in America, and what do they perceive as characterizing the religion of Islam? (4) What is the role of international Islam in affecting the development of American Islam and also what are the ways in which non-Muslim Americans understand and portray Islam and Muslims? These elements, of course, are not independent of each other, and together they become strands in the full complexity of what constitutes Islam in America. The three volumes under consideration taken together are repetitive in some aspects but also help round out the fuller picture of the beliefs and experiences of the members of this third-largest American religion.

Edward E. Curtis IV is the holder of the Millennium Chair of the Liberal Arts and professor of religious studies at Indiana University. He has written extensively on Islam in America, focusing particularly on the rise and development of African American movements and figures. Curtis is the author of *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2006), *Islam in Black America* (Albany, NY, 2002), and *The New Black Gods* (Bloomington, IN, 2008), and is the editor of two comprehensive overviews of American Islam, *The Columbia Sourcebook of Muslims in the United States* (New York, 2008), and *The Encyclopedia of Muslim American History* (New York, 2010). Curtis's style, exemplified in the volume under consideration here, is to offer the reader a general overview of the subject at hand, primarily by means of biography and story. His works are highly readable, though he seldom provides a deep analysis of the material under consideration, preferring to let the stories speak for themselves.

Curtis warns the reader immediately not to expect an extended analysis of either terrorism or Islamophobia, but he does offer sufficient commentary for the reader to feel a taste of what the past decade of American history has meant to American Muslims. In the concluding chapter, for example, he argues that "Muslim American life during the war on terrorism was open to the bright light of self-examination and vulnerable to the heat of prejudice" (107). No treatment of Islam in America, of course, can avoid the devastating consequences for Muslims of the 9/11 events and the examples of anti-Islamic response on the part of other American citizens.

All three of these authors seem fascinated by individual examples of conversion to Islam, most notably figures such as white Alexander Russell Webb and black Timothy Drew of the Moorish Science Temple and Elijah (Poole) Muhammad of the Nation of Islam. Curtis places more emphasis on the influence of the Ahmadiyya movement in the conversion of (mainly) African Americans to Islam than do many histories of Islam in America. For a short book, *Muslims in America* spends considerable time exploring the development of black movements affiliated with Islam, showing how blacks have been attracted to the religion both for its political and economic potential

and for its religious content. Curtis underscores the effect of American political policies and actions overseas during the decades of the twentieth century and how Muslim immigrants coming with this history fresh in their minds have contributed to the narrative of Islam in America. He shows the relationship of Islam to the development of American policies and politics, describing an interdependence that GhaneaBassiri surely would appreciate. Curtis's emphasis on the role of Muslim missionaries to America in the development of American Islam provides a nice parallel to Kidd's discussion of the role of American missionaries on the self-image of international Islam. Alone of the three books under consideration, Curtis offers a thoughtful presentation of the movement represented by what he calls "an unprecedented number" of thinkers who have believed in the right to interpret scriptures for themselves—Sunnis and Shi'ites, African Americans, and immigrants.

Reading Curtis's *Muslims in America* is rather like looking at a photo album. The reader sees the particulars in very interesting detail but may wish for a more consistent narrative that fits the pieces into a comprehensive whole. One finds in Curtis efforts to do what GhaneaBassiri dedicates his volume to doing, namely, showing how events in US history have affected Muslim American life, arguing that "the saga of Muslim America is an extricable part of the American story" (xiii). I do feel that for one so well acquainted with African American Islam, Curtis might have described in a more satisfactory manner the relationship of black Islam to immigrant Islam as well as other converts to the faith. The book is comfortable and pleasing but offers a number of tasty bites of information without providing the full meal.

While it serves as a helpful introduction to the complexity of American Islam, and perhaps a good addition to a course on religion in America or even the sociology of religion, *Muslims in America* falls a bit short of the author's stated intention of "unearthing" the history of Muslims in the United States or tracing the connections of Muslim Americans to Muslims abroad. Curtis does do these things, he just does not do them in depth or comprehensively. But then, one could scarcely expect otherwise in so brief a volume.

Looking at American Islam from the inside out, so to speak, is Thomas Kidd in *American Christians and Islam*. Kidd is associate professor of history at Baylor University and an accomplished scholar of American history. His recent *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution* (New York, 2010) and *Patrick Henry: First among Patriots* (New York, 2011) indicate his interest in the roots of American democracy and religion. He has written several books on the Great Awakening and the roots of evangelical Christianity. As he himself notes, he is not a scholar of Islam but a historian of religion in America. His sources for *American Christians and Islam* are the biographies of missionaries and other religious figures, church records, and newspaper reports, as well as more scholarly historical materials.

Kidd builds on what he sees as a steady stream of Evangelical Christian writing about Islam in the United States that portrays it as the creation of Satan, the perennial and persistent enemy of Christianity. Echoing a theme that can be identified in the very earliest Protestant anti-Muslim polemic, he says that Evangelical Christians have seen Islam as the first of the devil's tempting kingdoms, with Roman Catholicism as the second. One is reminded of medieval Roman Catholic polemic against Islam in which the Eastern church is seen as the twin arena of diabolic activity along with Islam. Kidd begins his book by telling the reader that he is dealing with Evangelical Christianity and not Christianity as a whole. While this distinction is clear, it might have been helpful to repeat it occasionally throughout the book, as the reader easily might be tempted to hear the Evangelical indictment of Islam as characteristic of all Christianity—certainly the American version. This could be especially discouraging to American Christians who have struggled, especially since 9/11, to assist Muslims in portraying Islam in as favorable a light as possible.

The yoked themes around which Kidd's book is developed are the malignant nature of Islam and the persistent hope that Christians will be able to convert Muslims to Christianity. Kidd develops his chapters on the biographies of Christian missionary theologians from Samuel Zwemer to Kenneth Cragg to contemporary Evangelical missions. (While history may prove differently, no contemporary figures dominate the scene as did Zwemer and Cragg in their respective periods or, indeed, the early Christian zealots about whom Kidd writes, such as Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards.) As a historian of religion in America and not an Islamicist, Kidd insists from the beginning that the book is not about Islam but about American Christians and the views they produced about Islam (xii). It might be surprising to some readers to see how early in American history the anti-Islam theme was articulated, encouraged to no small extent by the Barbary Wars and fear of Barbary pirates.

Kidd also does an excellent job of keeping the reader aware of the importance of contemporary international arenas of conflict, especially between Arabs and Israelis, and the relationship of world events to an American understanding of Islam. One senses that both Curtis and GhaneaBassiri would appreciate this linkage between national and international and how American policy in relation to the Middle East has affected the course of American history.

One of the most significant developments in Protestant history in America and in Europe was a growing division in the church body, beginning in the 1920s and '30s and becoming acute by the middle of the twentieth century. The rift was between those who felt the primary purpose of the church always must be to bring souls to Christ and those who were awakening to the importance of transforming the idea of conversion to that of conversation or dialogue. Kidd references this development but does not dwell on it, pri-

marily because Evangelicals have always favored the first alternative. Only in most recent times are some of them turning their attention to the importance of opening dialogue with Muslims, as Kidd notes in his last chapter on the United States after 9/11.

Much of contemporary American Evangelical literature bemoans the discrepancy between efforts of missionaries to “sow the seed” of the Christian gospel and the disappointing results of few conversions to Christianity from Islam. Kidd touches on this theme repeatedly, showing the development from the hopeful anticipation of thinkers like Samuel Zwemer in the early and mid-twentieth century to the contemporary realization of the need to rethink the Evangelical approach to Muslims both in America and abroad. He is thoughtful in his presentation of the fairly recent missionary strategy of “contextualization” in the appeal for Muslim attention. This approach tries to move away from identification of Christianity with the West and toward an emphasis on how it can fit easily and comfortably into any cultural context that has hosted Islam. Churches can resemble mosques, pastors can appear like imams, and Christ can be substituted for the call to Islam.

One of the most interesting aspects of the book is Kidd’s development of Christian eschatology in relation to Islam. The eschatological warning has been employed from early on through today’s Evangelical literature, suggesting that Islam is a major player in the development of the last days scenario, especially with the rise of the dispensationalist view of history. The focus of dispensationalism on a Jewish homeland set the scene very early for the contemporary Evangelical concern for the protection of the state of Israel as an essential component in the expectation of the second coming of Jesus. While Kidd would no more confess to being a theologian than an Islamicist, the reader is led through some complicated theological argumentation as he develops the transition between historicist and dispensational eschatology. He is very insightful in drawing together an understanding of history, theology, and politics in the urgency of preparing for the end days, as the complex relationship of Christianity to Judaism and support for the state of Israel is developed. He shows the delicacy of this eschatological/political narrative that, while appealing to Jews in its support of Israel, reveals that Israel will have only a temporary existence and that even Jews in the end days will be compelled to convert to Christianity if they are to be saved.

Kidd tells his readers right at the beginning that three findings surprised him in the course of his research: (1) the split between image and reality in terms of Muslim conversion to Christianity and the need to reconfigure initially cheery predictions about mass defection from one faith to another; (2) the transition among conservatives from a historicist perspective to a dispensational eschatology, the details of which he carefully provides. Particularly interesting to me is the difference that these alternatives in theology present for understanding the role of Islam in the eschatological narrative.

"Only since 2001," he says in the introduction, "has political Islam assumed a role as the leading villain in some Americans' scenario of the last days" (xvii); (3) the clash between two of the primary themes in the twentieth-century Evangelical interpretations of Islam, dispensationalism, and mission. Kidd explains why, in succeeding chapters, this division of interpretation among Evangelical Christians is to him one of the most interesting findings of his research. Knowing ahead of time where the story will lead allows the reader to experience it both from the outside and the inside (i.e., from the writer's perspective), much as Curtis does with stories of Muslims.

When we come to GhaneaBassiri's volume, I believe that we have one of the best books available today describing how Muslims from the earliest days of their presence in America to the very contemporary period have both participated in and have been molded by the flow of American history. Kambiz GhaneaBassiri is associate professor of religion and humanities at Reed College and author of *Competing Visions of Islam in the United States*. Like Kidd, he is not an Islamicist but a historian of the United States. The volume under consideration here, *A History of Islam in America*, is a highly ambitious work that represents the author's first foray into this kind of lengthy and thorough historical study.

Muslims today find themselves at the crossroads of modern Islamic history and American religious history, says the author, an argument for which he persuasively has laid the groundwork. Muslims have struggled to determine their identity in the American context by responding to ideologies determinative of American culture, such as race and pluralism. Muslims in America are who they are to a great extent not only because they have been treated and responded to in certain ways but because of what America is and does, both at home and in the international context. GhaneaBassiri focuses particularly on communal relations and institutions developed by both immigrants and African Americans in America, especially in the latter part of the twentieth century and, most especially, after 9/11.

GhaneaBassiri argues that privileging Muslim voices as an approach to the history of Islam in America (as noted earlier, an approach he questions) serves to reify both Islam and America itself as mutually exclusive categories. "I have contended that this type of 'get-to-know-your-neighbor' scholarship, though *highly* admirable and humanizing, neglected to examine the dynamic development of Muslim institutions and communal relations in the history of the country" (367; emphasis added). He believes that his particular contribution to the study of American Islam comes through his analysis of American Muslim history as the intertwined history of Muslim and non-Muslim encounters and exchanges. Rather than being mutually exclusive, these forces in the development of American religious history are, in fact, relational.

Despite the length of the book and the extent of its range, GhaneaBassiri insists that his aim is not to be comprehensive but to focus on certain themes

in the development of Islam in America, interpreting them in terms of their historical context. While I personally respect his critique of the “get to know you” literature, I think that this book itself indulges a bit in that personal kind of approach, and, in my opinion, it adds to the strength of his study. The reader comes away understanding that both the early Muslim movements and collectivities of people in the United States and the most recent institution building that he so strongly emphasizes are the products of individual presences and initiatives. I see that emphasis as a real attraction of the book. It is a wonderfully presented historical work that nonetheless introduces its readers to the stories of real people in a way also characteristic of the writing of both Curtis and Kidd.

Like Curtis, GhaneaBassiri looks more specifically at representations of Muslims living in colonial and antebellum America than at the literary and political (or religious) images of Islam reflected in the period. And yet it is Kidd who can serve as a kind of partner to GhaneaBassiri. The first section of *A History of Islam in America* read in conjunction with Kidd shows the reader both the reality of what Muslims were experiencing and the prevailing mode, at least among Christians, of anti-Muslim prejudice. GhaneaBassiri’s description of the Barbary narratives illustrates a period in American history of which many of its citizens generally are unaware.

GhaneaBassiri adds some interesting material to what is now a growing field of inquiry, namely, the arrival, daily life, and general circumstances of African slaves who were Muslim. He argues that enslaved blacks eluded the categories of both black and Muslim as defined by race and religion. They become thereby somewhat liminal figures in American history, he says, neither savage nor civilized. GhaneaBassiri tries to show that debates about enslaved African Muslims, especially among Christians, played a role in fashioning American identity. These conversations also fed into the conception of the whole non-Christian world as a fertile field open to the civilizing forces of Christianity, with the slaves providing a beginning stage of this goal. Reading this text in conjunction with Curtis for a personal rendering of the lives of the slaves and with Kidd for the Christian perspective on early missionary thinking and the gradual Christianization of Muslims slaves provides a rich portrayal of this important phase of American history.

In many places, argues GhaneaBassiri, what appeared to be conversion of the Africans to Christianity was in reality the beginning of the creation of polyreligious common ground between Islam and Christianity. He sees this as setting the stage for the arrival of the series of quasi-syncretistic African American religious movements that sought the final identity of blacks in Asia and North Africa. When “belonging” was difficult for blacks after emancipation, some sought to find it in the forgotten homeland of Asiatic Islam. In the post-Civil War period, he says, this combination of “rationalism, modernity and progress” (132) came to be the watchword in American society. Christianity was understood to be the pinnacle in the

progression of religious sophistication from paganism through the world's religions to the final realization of the truth of Jesus Christ. Here again the argument fits cleanly with Kidd's illustrations of Christian piety and missionary impulse. Muslim "missionaries" to America such as the Sufi Inayat Khan needed to posit their message as one of clear rationalism and universality in order to be heard. In other places GhaneaBassiri uses the trinity of race, religion, and progress as the matrix through which triumphant American national identity was articulated. The rhetoric of America as open and tolerant ran counter, of course, to the lived experiences of many African American and immigrant Muslims, which the author finds ironic in light of the fact that the concept of rationalism is supposed to leave open a place for other religions.

As GhaneaBassiri moves his narrative into the twentieth century, he sharpens the descriptions of the kinds of prejudice experienced by Muslims in America. Inclusion into American society came through ethnicity rather than religion, whereby Muslims could identify themselves as part of the American impetus for progress. Muslim identity was particularly difficult during World War I when the Turks joined Germany in league against the United States. The author insists that key to their entry was neither their religion nor their accomplishments but whether they could be considered white, as Syrians and Indians tried to claim.

During the period between the two world wars Muslims began to change from sojourners into settlers and, as a group, came to be more prosperous. More women joined the community of males, and efforts to educate children in the faith were more evident. GhaneaBassiri cites this time as the beginning of the development of mosques and organizations, a movement that he considers crucial to understanding Muslim identity and involvement in American culture. At the same time black nationalist movements affiliated with Islam became stronger and more evident, most apparent in the growth of the Nation of Islam. The fraternal organizations introduced by Muslim missionaries and Sufis provided a model of institution building and self governance that were crucial to the growth of African American Muslim organizations.

GhaneaBassiri's careful detailing of the development of black American Muslim movements in the United States in the interwar period, including Black Nationalism, the Moorish Science Temple, the work of Ahmadi missionaries, and the rise of the Nation of Islam, dovetails nicely with Curtis's emphasis on this important formative period of American history. Curtis would no doubt agree with GhaneaBassiri's conclusion that "Islam was a means to deflect the stigma associated with the black race and to gain both recognition and self-respect" (225). Curtis might, however, question GhaneaBassiri's conclusion that with the importance of entertainment, healing, salvation, nationalism, and entrepreneurialism, prophecy became distorted and even tended to get lost. GhaneaBassiri sees the Nation of Islam as pro-

viding a conflation of blackness, Islam, and progress, paralleling the American ideal described earlier.

After the end of the Second World War, and with the assumption that America was a place for Protestants, Catholics, and Jews (affirmed in sociologist Will Herberg's classic of the same name), Muslims began looking for their own place in the description of religious life in the United States. Islam was affirmed as one of America's civil religions. Events such as the formation of the Federation of Islamic Associations in the United States and Canada began in earnest the institution building that GhaneaBassiri thinks is so important in the development of American Islam. The building of the Islamic Center in Washington, DC, signaled a new relationship with Muslim majority countries in other parts of the world, while in the United States the international Muslim student population was burgeoning. Young, bright, and dedicated to Islam, they soon formed the Muslim Student Association of America (MSA), an organization that continues today to be highly influential in the articulation of an Islam that is both American and universal. As GhaneaBassiri puts it, the Islamizing projects of the MSA found a fitting testing ground in the United States.

After 1965, as GhaneaBassiri clearly delineates, a number of concrete things occurred to help solidify the American Muslim community. A new flexible immigration law allowed for the entrance into America of large numbers of Muslims from a range of countries, greatly increasing the immigrant Muslim population. Elijah Muhammad, head of the Nation of Islam, died and passed on the leadership of his organization to his son Wallace, who under the name Warith Deen Mohammed changed the course of the organization and brought it into Sunni Islam. The organizational movements within Islam grew significantly, as did mosque and community center building, the development of Islamic institutions and organizations, the building of networks with the Islamic world, and the constant affirmation on the part of Muslims that Islamic values are compatible with American values. As GhaneaBassiri makes very clear, American Islam was no monolith but a collectivity of different cultures, different ideologies, and different ways of understanding and practicing Islam.

All three of the books under consideration, not surprisingly, give thoughtful attention to the circumstances of the American Muslim community in all its different dimensions in the post-9/11 period of American history. GhaneaBassiri puts more emphasis than the others on the importance of organizations such as the Council for American Islam Relations; the Muslim women lawyer's association, known as KARAMA; the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Sciences; and many others that were acting to provide political leverage for American Islam. He makes the very noteworthy point that the past decade has seen a maturing of Islam in which these kinds of organizations began to focus less on relations between American Muslims and their international cultural antecedents and more on relations

between local Muslim communities in the United States and the national government, including more sophisticated use of various forms of media. It has fallen to American Muslims to defend more vehemently than ever before their right to practice their faith in the public domain and to affirm its legitimate place in American religious heterogeneity. In trying to bridge the gap between their lived experience as Muslims and the often negative public representation of Islam after 9/11 and several other international incidents, American Muslims have struggled, as GhaneaBassiri puts it, “to create contexts in which they could live their religion neither in its Islamist idealized form nor in its stigmatized form” (377).

Literature on Muslims/Islam in America is proliferating these days. One can read histories, biographies, social and economic analyses, Christian demonization tracts, and Muslim polemic about the greatness of Islam in the West. There is always room for good books, and, in my opinion, these three all make important contributions to an understanding of the new reality of American Islam. By good fortune the three complement each other, and when they overlap, it is generally to provide other perspectives. I appreciate the opportunity to have read them and fully support their use with the appropriate audiences as suggested above.

Book Reviews

REYMOND, ERIC D. *New Idioms within Old: Poetry and Parallelism in the Non-Masoretic Poems of 11Q5 (= 11QPs^a)*. Early Judaism and Its Literature 31. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011. xiv+228 pp. \$29.95 (paper).

New Idioms within Old offers close readings of seven poems of the Second Temple period that were all copied as part of the Qumran scroll designated 11QPs^a (11Q5). A chapter is devoted to each poem, following a more or less uniform structure that consists of an introduction, a poetically arranged transcription accompanied by a tabular analysis of its prosodic and syntactic schemes, a translation, philological notes, general exegetical observations, appreciation of the literary properties of the poem, and a conclusion. A general introduction addresses the main methodological principles and procedures employed in the analyses. The book ends with a summative conclusion.

Among the seven poems studied in Raymond's volume, a few were known prior to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls: Sir. 51:13–30 (chap. 2) was known from the Genizah Ms. B of Sirach, Psalm 151 (chap. 3) has a Greek version in the Septuagint, and Syriac liturgical tradition preserved translations of Psalms 154 and 155 (chaps. 4 and 5, respectively). A shorter version of Psalm 154 is contained in another (4Q448). Three other texts were first discovered among the scrolls: the *Apostrophe to Zion* (chap. 6) was also copied in 11QPs^b (11Q6) and 4QPs^f (4Q88), and a portion of the *Plea for Deliverance* (chap. 7) is found in 11QPs^b; the only poem for which we have no other textual witness is the *Hymn to the Creator* (chap. 8). Raymond is content with discussing only the Hebrew versions and generally refrains from sustained analysis of the Greek and Syriac versions, wherever these are extant.

The analysis of each text is meticulous. The author is sensitive to the language and texture of the Hebrew poems, and his discussion of them is always well-grounded in the Hebrew text while cautiously weighing the various interpretations proposed by previous scholars. His close reading uncovers the extensive dialogue of the poems with the Hebrew Bible, from which the ancient poets drew not only their spiritual inspiration but also much of their diction and stylistic modes of expression. Much of Raymond's discussion is devoted to exploring the ways in which allusions to biblical passages are deployed and used by the later poets in order to express their own religious sentiments. Students of these poems will find this book to be a very useful resource to guide them through these intriguing Hebrew poems, and it enhances our appreciation of Hebrew religious poetry of the Greco-Roman period. All future inquiries into any of the texts discussed here would benefit from the careful investigations of the form and content of these poems.

Notwithstanding the merits of the book as far as the close reading of individual texts is concerned, readers should also be aware of three shortcomings of a more general nature. First, a fundamental problem is inherent in the restricting of the discussion to poems that are contained in 11QPs^a but are not part of the Masoretic Psalter. These technical characteristics are not enough for considering the poems as a literary corpus that merits independent analysis, and the two criteria of selection actually contradict each other. On the one hand, had the inclusion of the seven poems in a single manuscript been determined by immanent, content-specific or function-

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specific considerations, then the “non-Masoretic” poems must have shared them with all the other, “Masoretic” psalms contained in 11QPs^a, which should have thus been included in the discussion as well. On the other hand, “non-Masoretic” psalms are found in many other scrolls from Qumran, but no attempt is made to distinguish the seven poems from the wider corpus of Second Temple poetry. The scope of the book thus lacks intrinsic justification.

Second, Reymond’s commendable focus on the Hebrew texts in their given form cannot obviate the necessity to take into account other textual witnesses, including the ancient versions. His decision not to deal with large-scale text-critical issues hampers the understanding of the texts, especially since readings from the versions are sometimes incorporated into the reconstruction of fragmentarily preserved poems (Sir. 51, Pss. 154 and 155). Like other literary texts of antiquity, the poems were evidently submitted to processes of appropriation and revision during their transmission, and their received form cannot be taken uncritically, especially when there is undeniable evidence for scribal and literary activity.

The problem is most conspicuous with (although not unique to) Reymond’s analysis of Psalm 151. Although Reymond naturally refers to the fact that the Hebrew version recorded in 11QPs^a is considerably longer than the Greek version contained in the Septuagint, he does not engage in full analysis of the latter or its underlying Hebrew *Vorlage*. He is therefore forced to harmonize, sometime with considerable exegetical cost, obvious difficulties embedded in the Hebrew version. He also overlooked a previous study that bears directly on the issue (M. Segal, “The Literary Development of Psalm 151: A New Look at the Septuagint Version,” *Textus* 21 [2002]: 139–58), as it demonstrated (conclusively, in my opinion) the originality of the text underlying the Greek version and explored the motivation for the various additions found in the longer Hebrew recension.

Third, and finally, it is hard to accept Reymond’s redefinition of some basic concepts of crucial importance for the literary analysis practiced throughout the book. Most problematic is the idiosyncratic use of the term “parallelism” to denote virtually any kind of verbal repetition, including distant occurrences of the same word or root (separated sometimes by many poetic lines). Such an expansion of the term renders it much less valuable, and the unique set of literary preferences and stylistic restrictions that are embedded in this literary mode are lost. A more conservative use of the notion of parallelism would have allowed Reymond to take note of remarkable differences between biblical poetry and some of the poems he discusses.

Similarly, the algebra-like grammatical and semantic analyses, which are placed to the right of the transcription of each poem and serve as basis for a special section of the literary discussion, often reveal to the discerning eye that some poems follow no traditional path of parallelism and should rather be considered as reflecting a different poetics entirely (e.g., Sir. 51:13–30), while in other cases, the formulaic analysis appears to be much less regulated than the poem actually is, thus concealing the ways in which the art of parallelism has been practiced (e.g., Ps. 155). Within the religious context in which Second Temple poetry was written, both continuity of traditional poetics and its disjunction encode shifting theological sensitivities. Straightforward attention to the deployment of word pairs, the distinctive building blocks of traditional biblical parallelism, would have guided the author more confidently through the maze than does the overly sophisticated representation of formal features.

Despite these reservations, I found the book to be an interesting collection of careful and lucidly articulated studies. Reymond’s interpretations are based throughout on attentive reading of the texts in their original language, while also fully engaging previous scholarly treatments. Even when disagreeing with him, one cannot but re-

spect his dedicated work, which contributes to the elucidation of poetic texts with vital importance for our understanding of the religious and literary world of Second Temple Judaism.

NOAM MIZRAHI, *Georg-August-Universität Göttingen*.

NOVENSON, MATTHEW V. *Christ among the Messiahs: Christ Language in Paul and Messiah Language in Ancient Judaism*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. xiii+239 pp. \$74.00 (cloth).

Matthew Novenson's revised Princeton Seminary dissertation addresses a problem that he formulates as follows: "Scholars of ancient Judaism, finding only a few diverse references to 'messiahs' in the Hellenistic and Roman periods of Jewish literature, have concluded that the word did not mean anything determinate in that period. Meanwhile, Pauline interpreters, faced with Paul's several hundred uses of the Greek word for 'messiah,' have concluded that Paul said it but did not mean it, that *Christos* in Paul does not bear any of its conventional senses" (1). He addresses this problem using conventional historical criticism but with a distinctive emphasis on linguistics.

The work is divided into five chapters. The first traces the history of scholarship, beginning with F. C. Baur, and finds that contemporary scholarly opinion stands in an ironic position: "While most of the major monographs, commentaries, and theologies of Paul now follow Davies and Sanders in reading Paul in primarily 'Jewish' rather than 'Hellenistic' terms, on the question of the meaning of *Christos* they nevertheless perpetuate the old *religionsgeschichtliche* thesis that Paul is revising, transcending, or otherwise moving beyond the messianic faith of the earliest Jesus movement" (32). The second chapter deals with "messiah language in ancient Judaism." Novenson firmly rejects the old conception of "the messianic idea," instead shifting the emphasis to "messiah language"—the existence of a body of texts that remained current even if messianic expectation fluctuated. He recognizes that the texts read as messianic in the Hellenistic and Roman periods did not necessarily use the word *mashiach*. These primary texts are Gen. 49:10, Num. 24:17, 2 Sam. 7:12–13, Isa. 11:1–2, Amos 9:11, and Dan. 7:13–14. (Jer. 23:5–6 should be added, and also Psalm 2, which is the only one of these texts in which the word *mashiach* is found). Novenson insists, following J. A. Fitzmyer, that these texts were not always interpreted in the same way. Instead, every occurrence of "messiah language" is "a creatively biblical act" (62).

In chapter 3, Novenson turns to Paul and argues that *Christos* is neither a name nor a title but, rather, an honorific, such as we often find with kings in the Hellenistic period (cf. Augustus). Chapter 4 discusses "Christ phrases" (e.g., "in Christ," "the people of Christ," "the faith of Christ"). The author concludes that "several philological features that have been taken to exclude the possibility of messiahship in Paul's thought do not in fact do so" (134). Specifically, "the facts that *Christos* is not an appellative, that it is not a predicate of a copulative sentence of which *Iesous* is the subject, that it is not modified by the genitive *kuriou* or *theou*, and that it is often anarthrous, are no evidence that it does not connote messiahship" (134). Conversely, phrases that have been taken to connote messiahship ("in Christ," "the people of Christ" or "the faithfulness of Christ") do not necessarily do so: "The sense of *Christos* cannot be read directly off the syntax of the phrases in which Paul uses it" (135). The question of meaning has to be settled at the sentence level. Accordingly, in the last chapter Novenson turns to "Christ passages in Paul." He examines nine passages: Gal. 3:16; 1 Cor. 15:20–28; 2 Cor. 1:21–22; Rom. 9:1–5; Rom. 15:3, 15:9; Rom. 15:7–12; 1 Cor. 1:23; 2 Cor. 5:16–17; Rom. 1:3–4. He concludes that "Paul's prose does

all that we normally expect any ancient Jewish or Christian text to do to count as a messiah text. He writes at length and in detail about a character whom he designates with the septuagintal word *Christos*, and he clarifies what he means by this polysemous term in the customary way—by citing and alluding to certain scriptural source texts rather than others. Paul's letters meet all the criteria for early Jewish messiah language" (172). Paul differs from non-Christian Jewish messiah texts in identifying Jesus as the messiah—but, argues Novenson, Paul uses scripture in similar ways and illustrates the diverse strands of messianism in early Judaism.

There is much to appreciate in this careful study, especially in its close analysis of Pauline phrases and passages. Novenson is undoubtedly right to conclude that while there are many interesting debates to be had about Paul's Christological categories, whether or not he conceives of Jesus as messiah is not one of them. Also, Novenson is correct in pointing to the role of scripture in Paul's understanding of the messiahship of Jesus.

These valuable contributions are undercut to a degree by an inadequate analysis of Jewish messianic texts. Novenson takes as reflecting the consensus the volumes edited by Jacob Neusner, William Scott Green, and Ernest Frerichs (*Judaisms and Their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era* [Cambridge, 1987]) and James Charlesworth (*The Messiah* [Minneapolis, 1992; based on a 1987 symposium]), both of which denied that there was any coherent idea of a messiah. These books were written before the full publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which occasioned a considerable reconsideration of the topic in the following decade. Novenson notes the recurring use of certain biblical texts, but perhaps because of his linguistic emphasis, he does not discuss traditions of interpretation. While it is true that texts can be interpreted in different ways, there was far more consistency in the interpretation of messianic texts than Novenson allows. There was diversity insofar as some texts speak of a priestly messiah or a prophetic messiah, but portrayals of the royal, Davidic messiah are remarkably consistent—he would be a warrior judge who would overthrow the Gentiles by divine aid. There is some revision of that portrait in the first century CE, through incorporation of the imagery of the "Son of Man" figure in Daniel 7, but he does not lose his militant character. Paul's use of messiah language entails a far greater revision. This revision is reflected in his choice of scriptural passages. Novenson emphasizes continuity in the use of Davidic texts such as 2 Samuel 7 and Isaiah 11, but several of the common messianic texts (such as Balaam's oracle) do not appear in Paul, while he gives messianic significance to several texts that were not elsewhere read that way. The ascription of messianic status to a figure who had died and risen again had no precedent in ancient Judaism (pace Israel Knohl's *The Messiah before Jesus* [Berkeley, 2000]) and called for a radical revision of the idea of a messiah.

In summary, Novenson's book is a valuable contribution to the subject. But it could be sharpened considerably by a fuller and more up-to-date treatment of Jewish messianism around the turn of the era.

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MITCHELL, MARGARET M. *Paul, the Corinthians and the Birth of Christian Hermeneutics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. xiv+178 pp. \$85.00 (cloth).

In this slim and elegant volume (115 dense pages, plus 43 pages of endnotes) with huge potential implications, Margaret Mitchell analyzes the hermeneutics of Christian scripture as taking place between the two poles of clarity and unclarity, the plain and the unplain, the literal and the allegorical. She argues that this type of hermeneutics was applied for the first time by the apostle Paul in his Corinthian correspon-

dence, then by his early Christian readers (from Ignatius via Valentinians, Irenaeus, Origen, Athanasius, the two Gregorys, and John Chrysostom to Theodoret of Cyrrhus)—and finally by modern biblical exegetes, too. If Mitchell is right, the Pauline moment in Corinth was to have an incalculable effect on every later Christian hermeneutical practice with regard to scripture. But is she right?

In Mitchell's argument the main weight falls on Paul himself and on his early Christian readers, with her reflection on modern exegesis taking up only eight pages at the end (108–15). Still, the attraction of the book also lies in the fact that Mitchell does present those modern implications (even though I am actually quite skeptical about their suggested content). Here, however, I will focus on her reading of Paul himself. With regard to her extensive, cogent, and very informative readings of the early Christian writers all through the book, I was largely persuaded. It does seem that these writers were drawing strongly on a range of rhetorical and hermeneutical principles that Paul had applied particularly in his Corinthian correspondence. Thus far Mitchell convinces with her claim that in those letters Paul had “tossed” this or the other rhetorical and hermeneutical principle into “the hermeneutical stream of the Christian tradition” (54). Even here, however, one may note a somewhat weaker formulation of the point—for example, when Mitchell urges us to “see how early Christian exegetical vocabulary is developed *both from the existing literary-rhetorical culture and from biblical terminology (Pauline and other)*” (xiii; my emphasis). So, there is no unique route, after all, from Paul to his followers. Still, there can be little doubt about Paul's historical role here, which was due not least, of course, to the status he had gained within the canon.

In her analysis of Paul, Mitchell focuses on the following texts: 1 Cor. 5:9–11 and 4:6 (chap. 2); 1 Cor. 1:10, 1:18–2:5, and 2:6–3:4 (chap. 3); 1 Cor. 13:12 and 2 Cor. 3:18, 1 Cor. 13:8–13, 1 Cor. 14, 2 Cor. 4:3, and 2 Cor. 2:14–7:4 (chap. 4); 2 Cor. 10–13 (chap. 5); and 2 Cor. 1:12–14, 2:3–9, and 7:8–13, and 2 Cor. 1:15–22 and 2:1–11 (chap. 6). Unfortunately, a brief review cannot provide the kind of engagement and argument that Mitchell's overall thesis so richly deserves. Here, I must focus on those points where I think she goes wrong.

First, Mitchell, who has herself previously delivered strong arguments for seeing 1 Corinthians as a single unified letter (as she continues to do), has over the past decade developed a theory according to which “the second canonical epistle is made up of what were originally [no fewer than] five separate letters” (6). She also claims that the main point of her book will hold whether or not one accepts her partition—“or any partition”—of 2 Corinthians but that only her view “better replicates the *genuine dynamism* involved in this vivid and heated exchange of letters” (6; Mitchell's emphasis). Now, if the latter point is intended to support her position, we seem very close to having a *petitio principii* if the “dynamism” is also meant to consist in Paul's renegotiation of the meanings of his own prior utterances when faced with the Corinthian reactions. For out of the sixteen or seventeen texts listed above (in one case, there is an overlap), only five actually refer explicitly to the proper understanding of something Paul had previously written: 1 Cor. 5:9–11 and 4:6; 2 Cor. 1:13, 2:3–4 and 9; and 2 Cor. 7:8. In order for Mitchell to avoid the charge of *petitio principii*, her argument must therefore presuppose her own very special theory of the partition of 2 Corinthians, in which each separate letter is taken to renegotiate the meanings of his prior utterances. On other partition theories (and, of course, on the nonpartition theory, which I personally favor), Paul is not constantly attempting to clarify what he had himself written in distinct letters but is instead “answering” general criticisms of his positions of which he had in one way or another been informed. Thus, against Mitchell's claim, the thesis of her book actually does stand or fall with her own quite special partition theory.

Second, as a result of her focus on principles of reading of Paul's own previous letters, Mitchell even extends the field of those readings from not just being directed at the letters (a point that, if there were many of them, might well be justified) but also at everything else that Paul is speaking about, including his own body. This fits her underlying view that "for Paul both the scriptural text and his own body and life were epiphanic media" (9–10). But it also means that all the distinctly rhetorical principles for how to handle a real, written text—such as a law—that Mitchell develops in detail from Cicero's *De inventione* (21–24) and employs throughout are applied quite directly to the whole of Paul's "apologetic" (another rhetorical, forensic term) for his message, himself, and his body. To my mind, this constitutes a huge "over-rhetorification," as if every statement were ipso facto a part of agonistic rhetoric. Mitchell herself notes that she has scholarly predecessors who have emphasized "the rootedness of early Christian exegesis in rhetorical training" (21) and claims that her argument "takes to its logical conclusion the insistence in some earlier and much more recent scholarship on the rhetorical underpinnings of early Christian exegesis" (x). But exegesis is one thing; a "logical conclusion" that sees any statement about the world as belonging within "apologetics" (quite narrowly defined as reflecting rhetorical techniques for how to handle written texts in an "agonistic" context) has surely gone over the top.

Third, in accordance with Mitchell's "textualization" of everything in Paul, she also adopts readings of important passages that fail to convince. One example is the famous contrast in 2 Cor. 3:6 between "letter" (*gramma*) and "spirit" (*pneuma*), which Mitchell explicitly reads as being identical with the well-known rhetorical contrast between "letter" and "intent." She does quote Richard Hays for the opposite, more recent view—and I will do so, too, since Hays remains to my mind exactly right here: "When Paul's argumentative framework is kept firmly in mind, it becomes evident that *gramma* and *pneuma* are not the names of hermeneutical principles and that the difference between them is not a distinction between two ways of reading texts" (145 n. 53).

Another example is her account of Paul's startling claim in 1 Cor. 2:16 that "we"—Christ-believers who have also received the *pneuma* (1 Cor. 2:12)—"possess the *nous* of Christ." On page 40, Mitchell (correctly) translates the *nous* as the "mind" of Christ. On page 42, however, the *nous* becomes the "mind/meaning of Christ . . . for *nous* can suggestively mean either 'mind,' 'meaning' or 'sense.'" Finally, on page 52, the *nous* becomes merely "the meaning of Christ." Here Mitchell's pervasive emphasis on reading (and hence "hermeneutics") clearly bypasses Paul himself.

Fourth, one must ask, where do misreadings of this kind come from? Answer: from Mitchell's thorough appreciation of Paul's early Christian readers, that is, from the use *they* made of him. Bluntly put, there is a high risk here of an anachronistic reading of Paul (which may even lead to one more *petitio principii* with regard to Mitchell's overall thesis of Paul's role for the later hermeneutical tradition)—a reading that derives its perspective on Paul from the later tradition instead of from Paul himself. Methodologically, Mitchell speaks for "reading Paul backwards and forwards" (ix; and, again, 105). In principle, of course, such a methodological principle is perfectly sound. In practice, however, Mitchell has constructed her book in such a way that she invariably begins each chapter with Gregory of Nyssa and his defense, at the beginning of his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, of the allegorical reading over against the literal one. This contrast, then, sets the scene for everything that follows. In fact, Gregory even gets the very last word of the book (see 114–15). Thus, Gregory comes out as providing the lens through which the whole book, including its reading of Paul, has been constructed. The potential gain from running the risk was well worth the attempt. The actual loss, however, has, I think, proved damaging.

Fifth, it is this later tradition that gives Mitchell her fundamental contrast between the “literal” and the “allegorical,” the plain and the unplain. To capture this contrast, she introduces the concept of a “veil scale” that she finds in Paul “of careful strategic calibration between the utterly clear and the utterly obscure, depending upon the *skopos* of a given argument” (59). Mitchell even lets this contrast govern her basic picture of Paul as a person who was at one and the same time a politician (and rhetorician), who went for “clarity,” and a poet and prophet (and apocalypticist), who went for “obscurity” (63) and indeed “trafficked in mystery” (66). “Pauline poetics combines the two in strategic fashion,” she states; “Paul as I see him in this progression of letters becomes caught between the agonistic and the apocalyptic paradigms, the first of which requires forensic clarity, while the second gains its power precisely from mystery that remains tantalizingly behind the curtain” (63).

What troubles me in this is an underlying feature of Mitchell’s understanding of Paul—the allegorizing-mystery-monger that she does not herself bring to full consciousness even though it is definitely there. Mitchell’s picture of the “veiled” part of Paul’s message does not just rely on his (obvious) apocalypticism but also presupposes that Paul was in fact a “Platonist” of the kind introduced by two of Mitchell’s most powerful witnesses: Gregory (see above) and Origen. This is a momentous move. Where I have myself been arguing for a couple of decades that Paul was much closer—in complicated ways that must be spelled out—to contemporary philosophy than scholars have normally been prepared to accept, Mitchell halfway agrees. However, where I have argued that the relevant type of contemporary philosophy was Stoicism, Mitchell implicitly presupposes—and is directly led in that direction by her later Christian witnesses—that it was (incipient Middle) Platonism.

This issue is important because it contrasts the “incorporeal and spiritually intelligible reading with insight” (3; from Gregory) that is concerned with “the nature of noetic realities” (60; from Origen) with the corporeal epistemology and ontology of Stoicism. And the resulting picture of Paul differs quite dramatically. In Mitchell’s overall picture of Paul, Platonism, with its focus on a hidden world behind the world of appearances, and a rhetoric that may move strategically between concern for clarity and speaking in mystery go intimately together. (Of course, Plato himself would have been appalled.) As against this, I contend that we should see Paul as a pretty “naive” apocalypticist and also a materialist quasi-Stoic who was speaking directly about the sensible world. To Paul, what God had done in the Christ event was something wholly tangible and concrete. Paul’s basic worldview, which reflects its Jewish and Stoic pedigree, has a directness about it which—coming from her Platonizing later readers—Mitchell misses.

My conclusion is that in Paul’s case (no less than in the modern one, on which, sadly, I have not had space to comment here), we need not to leave rhetoric behind but to be clear on the wider framework within which rhetoric (whether Paul’s or that of modern exegesis) has its place. It is because she does not see this need with sufficient clarity that Mitchell’s extremely thought-provoking analysis of the rhetorical Paul ultimately fails to convince. Still, read the book!

TROELS ENGBERG-PEDERSEN, *University of Copenhagen*.

LESTER, ANNE E. *Creating Cistercian Nuns: The Women’s Religious Movement and Its Reform in Thirteenth-Century Champagne*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011. xxii+261 pp. \$45.00 (cloth).

For too long Cistercian nuns were invisible. Indeed, until about a generation ago some scholars even denied that nunneries could be considered part of the medieval

Cistercian order. The Cistercians' legislative pronouncements of the 1220s that henceforth no new houses of nuns were to be associated with them have been read backward, as forbidding any role for women in the order. Understanding the role of nuns in the thirteenth century has been further complicated because most scholars of monasticism (including me) have tended to concentrate on the twelfth century, the great age of new monastic orders, leaving the thirteenth century to historians of the friars.

Recently, however, a number of scholars, notably Constance Berman, have started breaking with the assumptions of twenty to thirty years ago about Cistercian nuns and have made them a central part of the history of the order's twelfth-century development. In *Creating Cistercian Nuns*, Anne Lester is carrying that idea further and focusing squarely on Cistercian nuns in the thirteenth century, in a rich work firmly based on archival documents from the Champagne region (a number of which appear as illustrations). The majority of the documents she uses have never been printed or even really noted in the past two centuries, even though roughly half of all new Cistercian convents founded in the first half of the thirteenth century were located in Champagne. Part of the reason, Lester suggests, that scholars have had trouble recognizing the prevalence of Cistercian nuns is that so many of their documents were inventoried with those from male houses and were thus easily overlooked.

Lester argues that the early thirteenth century was a time when many women, especially among the increasingly wealthy and well-educated bourgeoisie, decided to participate in the religious life, seeking a life of penance and of service to the needy. This was at the same time that women in Champagne were gaining new legal rights and independence. Many new communities of Cistercian women were established, some connected to the order from the beginning but most starting as independent houses that later affiliated with the order. All of these houses had rather tentative origins, generally being founded not by powerful counts and castellan lords but by members of the region's growing urban class—the same social group that produced the nuns themselves. Lester argues that the Cistercian Order was open to incorporating the Champagne convents because the nuns' ideal of service to the sick and the poor accorded well with the order's emphasis on manual labor and *caritas*.

One of the book's central concerns is the apparent paradox that dozens of women's convents became Cistercian at the very time that the order declared that it wanted no more such convents. Lester argues that the Cistercians had not turned against women *per se* but, rather, had found that communities in which the women carried out charitable activities instead of remaining strictly cloistered were problematic, even though these activities accorded well with the Cistercians' ideals. In the book's epilogue, Lester jumps ahead 150 years to the close of the fourteenth century, when many Cistercian nunneries fell into disrepair and disrepute. Overwhelmed by the economic and political struggles of the period, many nunneries became so small that they were turned into cells for male monks or simply disbanded.

The book's chief strength is Lester's familiarity with the sources. Her arguments are based on hundreds of unedited documents. She cites all the relevant secondary literature, both on medieval French monasticism and on gender issues. She is able to convey the experience of the nuns' lives, as perceived from both within and outside the cloister. Especially interesting is her discussion of how and why women decided to leave the secular world, often starting as recluses (*Filles-Dieu*) before becoming cloistered—if they ever took formal vows at all. Many of these converts were from well-to-do backgrounds, but some houses of women were especially populated by retired prostitutes.

The chief weakness of the work is an almost complete lack of attention to the twelfth century. Cistercian nuns had existed nearly as long as the Cistercian order itself, and

twelfth-century nunneries appear in the list in the appendix of Cistercian houses for women; but Lester, by concentrating on convents founded in the thirteenth century, gives the unfortunate impression that only at this time did the order have to come to terms with women's communities. The term "reform" is used throughout in a somewhat imprecise and slippery way: not in the usual sense of making the monastic life more rigorous or of returning to monastic roots (as male Cistercians asserted they were doing) but, rather, to mean institutionalization and adherence to exterior norms. The relationship between the crusading movement and the foundation of nunneries remains somewhat unclear, although a whole chapter is dedicated to it, and one wishes that the fourteenth-century decline in the nunneries had not been treated so summarily.

Overall, however, this book is a welcome addition to the histories both of the Cistercians and of women's religious communities in general. The nuns found in these pages were independent, ready to define piety for themselves rather than always deferring to men. Their form of religious life could vary considerably, making it something of a challenge for the members of the hierarchy to define them and assign them to what was considered their proper place. These nuns demonstrate that the waves of spiritual enthusiasm that animated the friars in the thirteenth century could affect more traditional monastic orders just as much.

CONSTANCE B. BOUCHARD, *University of Akron*.

LARSEN, TIMOTHY. *A People of One Book: The Bible and the Victorians*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. vi+326 pp. \$55.00 (cloth).

In the annals of Protestant biblicism, it would be hard to find a more zealous Bible man than the Particular Baptist Charles Spurgeon, the most celebrated British preacher of the nineteenth century. As Timothy Larsen recounts in *A People of One Book*, Spurgeon repeatedly insisted that the entire biblical canon is not only infallible but also spiritually significant. He liked to tell the anecdote of a man who came to Christ through the reading of a biblical genealogy. He also extolled the Bible's influence in his own life: "The Book has wrestled with me; the Book has smitten me; the Book has comforted me; the Book has clasped my hand; the Book has warmed my heart" (quoted on 272). He urged his listeners to follow his own practice of daily Bible reading and warned of the consequences of failing to do so: "There is dust enough on some of your Bibles to write 'damnation' with your fingers" (quoted on 262).

Spurgeon's biblicism is not surprising, given his professed affinities with the Puritan tradition, which held that an infallible Bible contains all things necessary for salvation. More surprising—or, at least, more noteworthy—is that thoroughgoing scripturalism was not the province of a hyper-Protestant few among Spurgeon's contemporaries in Victorian Britain. Indeed, Larsen's thesis, expressed in his book's title, is that the Bible was the common cultural currency of Victorian Britons, whose deep familiarity and engagement with scripture has not been equaled since in the English-speaking world. Though Larsen focuses exclusively on elite figures, his twelve case studies—six women, six men—illuminate the extent to which the Bible was the great touchstone for Victorian intellectuals of every ideological stripe.

In his erudite treatment of these dozen representative figures, Larsen, the McManis Professor of Christian Thought at Wheaton College, offers a virtual survey of the Victorian religious landscape. His figures' complicated, and often self-contradictory, attitudes prove Ralph Waldo Emerson's adage that a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds. Thus we find the famous biologist T. H. Huxley, who coined the term "agnostic" in reference to himself and accused his opponents of harboring a

“Bible-fetish” (208), nevertheless insisting that the Bible must be an integral part of London’s new public school curriculum. Or we find the nursing pioneer Florence Nightingale, who dismissed as bibliolatry the idea that the Bible is a special revelation, following a lifelong regimen of daily Bible reading and even requiring scripture study as part of her nurses’ training. Or we find the Tractarian leader E. B. Pusey, whom hyper-Protestants regarded as an enemy of scripture because of his exalted view of sacramental Real Presence, insisting that “all truth” lies in Holy Scripture and that the Bible is “the most Tractarian book I ever open” (19–20). Or we find the Catholic archbishop of Westminster Nicholas Wiseman, who insisted on the infallibility of the church and its traditions, nevertheless writing whole books to prove that churchly doctrines such as the Real Presence were based on nothing more (or less) than what Protestants called the Bible’s plain sense.

All four of these figures believed it important to study the Bible in its original languages and engaged in extensive professional (Pusey and Wiseman) or amateur (Huxley and Nightingale) biblical criticism. The same was true of several other persons profiled by Larsen, including Charles Bradlaugh, nineteenth-century Britain’s most public atheist, who taught himself Hebrew in order to critique scripture in his book *The Bible: What It Is* (1870). Similarly, the Salvation Army cofounder Catherine Booth, an advocate of women’s leadership in the churches, marshaled Greek to argue that Phoebe (Rom. 16:1) was a “deacon,” not a “servant,” as the King James Bible had it. Those of Larsen’s subjects who did their exegesis purely in English were no less industrious in mining scripture for usable texts. Case in point is the Quaker prison reformer Elizabeth Fry, who frequently advised royalty, including the soon-to-be Queen Victoria, on Bible study strategies. Larsen makes fascinating use of Fry’s personal annotated Bible (housed in the British Library), which reveals what Larsen calls Fry’s “running refutation of teetotalism” (191). At 2 Chron. 2:10, which lists twenty thousand baths (a bath was about six gallons) of wine among Solomon’s provisions for the servants building the temple, Fry jotted: “wine included as a necessary provision by the wisest man” (191).

Larsen is occasionally pugnacious in criticizing other scholars for failing to take seriously his subjects’ biblical exegesis. He finds particularly egregious, for example, the failure of some modern scholars to reckon with E. B. Pusey as a biblical interpreter in such works as his 668-page-long *Daniel the Prophet* (1864). Yet Larsen also acknowledges the incompleteness of his own account of the Victorians’ love affair with scripture. In his book’s conclusion, he explains that he had originally envisioned a two-volume treatment of the subject but that Oxford University Press vetoed this as a “commercial non-starter” (276). He goes on in the conclusion to sketch his plans for three of the abandoned chapters, which would have focused on Spiritualists (drawing on his survey of two of the movement’s magazines), the Jewish novelist Grace Aguilar, and the Plymouth Brethren tract writer Emily Gosse.

One senses that the possible subjects for a book on Victorians and the Bible are endless and that any sample of them potentially suffers from the appearance of arbitrariness. The beauty of Larsen’s book, however, is the rich detail in which he portrays his representative figures, who all reveal the same Victorian fluency with scripture. Even the iconoclasts—people who denied the Bible’s validity on matters ranging from historical fact to ultimate salvation—were incurable proof texters who delighted in one-upping their opponents with virtuosic displays of their biblical knowledge. It is difficult not to marvel that an ancient text could provide such a common point of cultural departure. One wonders whether such a shared idiom or set of reading practices will ever emerge again amid the atomistic—though, in its own way, textually saturated—culture of our own digital age.

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TWEED, THOMAS. *America's Church: The National Shrine and Catholic Presence in the Nation's Capital*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 391 pp. \$35.00 (cloth).

The foundational insight of Thomas Tweed's most recent book, *America's Church*, is that church buildings are living structures—not only because they are often physically transformed over time but also because they are subject to the dynamism of shifting viewpoints, interpretations, and historical contexts. In a sense, they are both works of art and works of faith; consequently, they have a life that transcends the mere fact of their existence as physical structures. Tweed demonstrates that, although clergy were responsible in substantial measure for the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, DC, this great church has been throughout its history the product of an engagement—complete with its tensions—between lay and ordained Catholics. Along the way, he offers insight into the changing elements of popular piety and American Catholics' self-understanding over the course of the twentieth century. He also shows how the shrine became incorporated into its host city's landscape, one among many monumental structures that seek to ascribe meaning to the American project. Ultimately, he reveals how the shrine has lived—and continues to live—as both a sacred and a civic structure.

Tweed takes his readers on a complete tour of the shrine, beginning with its articulation as an idea in 1909 through the golden anniversary of its dedication in 2009. Far from providing a simple chronicle of its design and construction, he digs deeply into the archives to discover how its realization was financed, and he emphasizes the often anonymous women and children who, between the 1910s and 1950s, solicited funds for its construction. He sees these invisible figures as essential actors in the shrine's history and, in so doing, restores them as elements of its capacity to be a living presence. He also highlights the shrine's place as a symbol of Catholicism in America—a symbol that shifted over the course of time from being a projection of Catholic aspirations to influence amid a reflexively anti-Catholic culture to a manifestation of Catholics' conspicuous "arrival" as they attained unquestionable power in national politics and culture.

Throughout the book, Tweed offers a perceptive reading of the shrine as a marker of shifting American Catholic identity. Early on, it projected its defensive elements. For example, the author shows how the crypt church—the oldest part of the shrine, in active use since 1924—served as a counterpoint to and argument against a broad Protestant disdain for Marian devotion. By taking its motifs directly from early Christian catacombs and mosaics, the crypt's designers indicated that devotion to the Mother of God was a part of Christian piety long before the rejection of Marian devotion by modern reformers. Tweed goes on to discuss the significance of the shrine as a retort to the National Cathedral—an Episcopal edifice that had been fashioned as the "nation's church," in part to indicate the essentially Protestant character of the United States. He also highlights how the various chapels around the interior perimeter of the shrine—chapels sponsored by a full range of ethnic groups, ranging from the Irish and Poles to Mexicans and Filipinos—symbolically highlight Catholicism's historic function as an organic and unifying phenomenon in the United States. Finally, he shows how the shrine's placement as a major presence on Washington's cityscape speaks of Catholicism as an influence even beyond the American Catholic community.

This book is a unique and valuable resource, in many ways a model for what a study of a single church should look like. It is wide-ranging in the themes it treats, including the significance of gender and race in the shrine's history. It suggests the shrine's significance as a site for ongoing interpretation as American Catholicism proceeds more deeply into what might be called a postinstitutional phase in its history.

This massive shrine was the product of a historical moment when American Catholicism was at its organizational peak, persistently spawning new brick-and-mortar structures that bespoke institutional vitality. In recent decades, that moment has decidedly passed as church-sponsored institutions have been closing down. What does the shrine mean in this context? What will it mean as historical trends play out over the next twenty or fifty years? The genius of Tweed's analysis is that it highlights the shrine for what it has been and will surely continue to be: a polyvalent symbol that affords new opportunities for interpretation and meaning in every era.

JAMES P. MCCARTIN, *Fordham University*.

SPONHEIM, PAUL R. *Love's Availing Power: Imaging God, Imagining the World*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011. xii + 184 pp. \$49.00 (cloth).

Three characteristics of this Lutheran theologian's work over many years are in evidence in his latest, relatively brief volume, *Love's Availing Power*. One is his deep and explicit indebtedness to an unlikely pair of philosophical theologians—Søren Kierkegaard and Alfred North Whitehead—and a determination to hold them together, in his thought, as representing, respectively, the existential and the cosmological aspects of Christian witness and theological reflection. Another is an abiding concern with the theological problem of creaturely suffering, a problem that itself relates the existential and the cosmological (the volume *God, Evil, and Suffering: Essays in Honor of Paul R. Spohnheim* [St. Paul, 2000] bears witness to this preoccupation). The third is a distinctive theological style that might be called “conversational,” though it eludes any simple label (“eclectic” is also accurate, but inadequate). Paul Spohnheim might say, with Tennyson's Ulysses, “I am a part of all that I have met”—a sentiment with which Gadamer might resonate and which captures something of, for instance, Whitehead-as-construed-by-Spohnheim (or any other engaged reader). In any event, all that this theologian has met, or read, seems to be a part of him and of his thinking. The text abounds with references to a wide range of authors, sometimes of disparate theological approaches, from whom he has drawn insight or inferred support for the line of thought he is developing. There are 727 endnotes (for 135 pages of main text), many of which contain additional comment on the point under discussion. Although the decision to relegate these comments to the endnotes was probably made in the interest of producing a smoother and more accessible text, I wondered at times whether the incorporation of the substance of many of these notes into the text itself would not have aided the reader in understanding and following the argument.

Starting from the affirmation that “God is love,” and from Eberhard Jüngel's injunction that “to think God as love is the task of theology,” the main question Spohnheim seeks to pursue here is that of “how love ‘works’ for the Creator and the creatures. What power does love have? How does it create effects?” (x). How does love's power avail?

There are five chapters, bookended by a brief introduction and conclusion. The first two chapters develop relevant aspects of the thought of Kierkegaard and Whitehead, respectively. Kierkegaard's emphasis on the individual creature's freedom, and his account of the love of God as a love that empowers and liberates the creature (borrowing a Socratic insight that “the art of power consists precisely in making another free” [13]), are central to the first chapter's contribution. In the second, love's power of attraction or persuasion is the main theme appropriated from Whitehead. Love “works,” then, by both letting the beloved be and calling the beloved into a relationship of free response. Spohnheim finds both freedom and relationality to be key

concepts in the work of both thinkers, although with different emphases and nuances; Kierkegaard's concern with subjectivity and "the individual" needs to be exposed to Whitehead's cosmological concern, and vice versa. "They wrote, respectively, of self and world in relation to God," he observes (6); the task is to show how these two visions come together.

The third and fourth chapters apply the results of the first two to the circumstances that give rise to the question of love's "availing," namely, creaturely limitations (chap. 3) and the power of evil (chap. 4), and these findings are then brought together and extended in the final chapter and conclusion. A major merit of the book—and perhaps sufficient reason alone to read and ponder it—is the author's clear and cogent distinction between the normal features and consequences of creaturely finitude (e.g., vulnerability, mutual conflict, frustration, loss, death) and the effects of evil. In this, Sponheim differs from those Christian theologians early and late who wish somehow to attribute all creaturely suffering to evil agency. Although the Kierkegaardian influence is by no means absent from Sponheim's constructive reflections on these issues, it is the Whiteheadian influence that seems preeminent here. The key both to "living with courage in the face of finitude" (48) and to living "against evil" (chap. 4) is a kind of conversion, similar to the conversion recounted in Job 42: "a stunning reversal in [Job's] understanding of God" (130) as he gains a glimmer of both the scope and the character of God's work.

It is, apparently, to that sort of conversion that the book directs its reader. It combines considerable erudition with a personal, at times informal, tone. It is suggestive rather than explicit when it comes to the sort of constructive synthesis of existentialist and process-metaphysical strands of philosophical theology it seems to call for. But at times—for instance, when mentioning Whitehead's comments on the failure of classical Christian thinkers to carry through with the implications of their Trinitarian doctrine for cosmology—Sponheim seems to point us deeper into the Christian tradition to discover resources for the kind of critical theological reconstruction we need. Meanwhile, the clarity, honesty, and maturity of this unusual treatise commend it to readers in search of some wisdom on the matters with which it deals.

CHARLES M. WOOD, *Southern Methodist University*.

SHEVELAND, JOHN N. *Piety and Responsibility: Patterns of Unity in Karl Rahner, Karl Barth, and Vedanta Desika*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011. 203 pp. \$89.95 (cloth).

This book, by John N. Sheveland, brings a prominent Catholic, Protestant, and Hindu theologian—Karl Rahner, Karl Barth, and the fourteenth-century Srivaisnava theologian Vedanta Desika, respectively—into conversation on the theme of the relation between piety and responsibility, or, to use more traditional Christian terminology, the relation between the response to divine grace and human works. The book advances two theses, one material and the other methodological. Materially, it argues that piety and responsibility—the individual's vertical relationship with God and horizontal relations with fellow human beings—do not exist in a competitive, zero-sum relationship. Rather, piety is at once the presupposition and the telos of authentic human relations, and, conversely, ethical responsibility is the natural expression and authentication of piety.

Methodologically, the book seeks to demonstrate that additional insight into the unity of piety and responsibility can be generated through an ecumenically and interreligiously inclusive theological method. Perhaps the most original aspect of the

book is its use of the metaphor of musical polyphony to understand this inclusive method of doing theology. The musical metaphor provides an elegant structure to the book. The first theologian considered, Karl Rahner, provides the melody line. Karl Barth, the subject of the following chapter, provides the harmony. Vedanta Desika, the third theological voice to be introduced, transforms an ecumenical harmony into an interreligious polyphony. The three core chapters of the book thus mark an ever-widening horizon of theological inclusivity: Barth introduces an ecumenical dimension, which is further expanded, with Vedanta Desika, into interreligious conversation—a broader ecumenism, one could say. Sheveland insists that the polyphonic model does not “privilege normatively” Rahner’s theology over the other two simply because it provides the melody line (5). Nevertheless, it seems to me that Rahner remains the central focus of the comparison; subsequent chapters serve to deepen and nuance Rahner’s basic, noncompetitive conception of the relation between piety and responsibility. I hasten to add, however, that this rootedness in Rahner’s tradition is nothing to be apologetic about. It is, after all, a central presupposition of the hermeneutical comparative theological method that Sheveland appropriates from David Tracy and Francis X. Clooney.

The metaphor of polyphony offers a compelling model for a comparative theological approach that affirms religious difference without, however, countenancing religious polemics. It thus distinguishes itself from universalist approaches to religious comparison that implicitly posit identity as a condition for religious acceptance. While affirming theological differences, however, it nevertheless seeks to reconcile them.

In “prioritizing theological aesthetics over antagonism” (200), the polyphonic method is not theologically neutral. The preference for reconciliation over polemic is axiomatic. For there is no reason, of course, why one cannot read theological texts polemically, particularly those, such as the Catholic and Protestant positions represented by Rahner and Barth, respectively, that were themselves developed historically in a polemical context. This point is important for appreciating a particular strength of Sheveland’s approach, namely, the way in which it exposes and dismantles the stereotypes fostered by a history of intercommunal polemic. He convincingly shows how reading Rahner through the lens of Barth focuses attention on the vertical, doxological dimension of the former, a dimension obscured by invidious characterizations of Rahner’s theology as a “theology from below” (166). And, conversely, reading Barth through a Rahnerian lens challenges the widespread view that Barth slighted human freedom (72) and, accordingly, had a weak appreciation for interpersonal responsibility (93).

The ecumenical dimension of Sheveland’s comparison beautifully illustrates and exemplifies a feature of today’s comparative theology more generally: it assumes a stance, at once critical and constructive, vis-à-vis the theological tradition in which it is inscribed. To the extent that the home tradition has invariably constituted itself in relation to its historical rivals, theological comparison is not external to an ongoing tradition of theological reflection but, rather, integral to it.

Such a history of previous polemics constitutive of the compared texts is largely absent with Vedanta Desika, however. For this reason, the interreligious dimension of Sheveland’s study is doing less work than the ecumenical one. Put differently, while Sheveland shows convincingly how, given the past history of intra-Christian polemic, a consideration of both Protestant and Catholic positions forms an integral part of contemporary Christian reflection on the faith/works relation, his argument for including Vedanta Desika in this reflection falls short of the strong claim that the interreligious dimension, like the ecumenical, is integral to it. His argument for in-

cluding Vedanta Desika rests on an appeal to the interreligious horizon in which all theological reflection takes place today (11). For many of us, this argument is enough. And yet the case for including a Hindu theologian such as Vedanta Desika could conceivably be bolstered against the skeptics by making explicit the reception history of the non-Christian thinker in question. If we look hard enough, we might find that that theologian represents a tradition in relation to which previous Christian theologians and missionaries have articulated a concept of Christian identity.

Admittedly, such historical work would detract from one of the chief virtues of the present volume: its clear theological focus. Indeed, one of the more refreshing aspects of Sheveland's book is the way it moves quickly and decisively into substantive theological comparison, though with a clear methodological self-awareness. The result is a concise and eloquent theological statement on the unity of piety and responsibility, one that is informed by a serious and theologically sensitive reading of both Christian and Hindu sources.

HUGH NICHOLSON, *Loyola University Chicago*.

JOHNSTON LARGEN, KRISTIN. *Baby Krishna, Infant Christ: A Comparative Theology of Salvation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011. x+246 pp. \$30.00 (paper).

As we near the twentieth anniversaries of Francis X. Clooney's groundbreaking *Theology after Vedānta* (Albany, NY, 1993), Diana Eck's *Encountering God* (Boston, 1993), and Keith Ward's *Religion and Revelation* (Oxford, 1994), it seems fair to say that the subdiscipline increasingly referred to as the "new" comparative theology—to distinguish it from the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century colonialist project of the same name—has come of age in the English-speaking world. One indication is the appearance of a significant number of specialized studies in Hindu-Christian, Buddhist-Christian, and other styles of interreligious theology by a second generation of comparativists, writing primarily but not exclusively from various Christian traditions. Another indication is the emergence of comparative theology textbooks, as well as good, credible exempla of comparative practice suitable for classroom use and more general audiences. *Baby Krishna, Infant Christ* exemplifies both developments.

An associate professor of systematic theology at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg and an ordained Lutheran pastor, Kristin Johnston Largen writes from an explicitly confessional perspective. Her primary interest here, as in her study *What Christians Can Learn from Buddhism* (Minneapolis, 2009), is in Christian soteriology. Specifically, she attempts to reveal that the rich narratives of the young Krishna from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and other popular Hindu traditions can assist Christians in reclaiming their own canonical and noncanonical traditions of the young Christ—and that both can fruitfully reshape and enrich Christians' imaginings of how God saves. In this sense, her work represents not just an interreligious theology but also an interreligious narrative theology. Late in the study, Largen quotes Roberto Goizueta's contention that the full, embodied, and affective nature of human experience implies that "we cannot understand that lived experience through concepts alone" (209). Although it is mentioned in passing, this citation seems to reflect Largen's conviction throughout that theology, including comparative theology, must resist reducing the revelatory power of narrative to the merely notional and conceptual. The exploits of young Krishna, in her view, help greatly in this task.

The book itself is beautifully organized. The first chapter introduces the reader to the new comparative theology, arguing for its importance both as an expression

of Christian love and as a response to God's universal, self-revealing relation to all creation. Largen next takes up the narratives of Krishna's youth, beginning with an account of these narratives against a broader context of Hindu tradition (chap. 2) and then moving from this exposition to isolate *līlā*, or playfulness and the erotic aspect of loving devotion, as aspects of God's saving grace revealed with special clarity therein (chap. 3). From this treatment of Krishna, she turns to ancient Christian narratives of the youthful Christ, as revealed in the canonical infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke, as well as the extracanonical *Protoevangelium of James* and *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. Her approach here mirrors the treatment of Krishna, first offering extended exposition (chap. 4) and then isolating particular themes for further reflection (chap. 5). Some readers may be surprised to discover relatively little direct comparison between the stories of Krishna and Jesus, as such. The emphasis falls instead upon the role of the Krishna narratives to impel the Christian comparativist to rediscover comparable narratives in her own tradition. Nevertheless, Largen does draw some similar insights from both traditions, notably the themes of play, spontaneity, and affectivity, including anger, as significant aspects of God's character and, thus, of the salvation God extends to all people.

One might have hoped, from this coincidence of insights, for a creative, synthetic conclusion or perhaps a systematic application to a contemporary Lutheran theologian. The two final chapters fail somewhat on this score, instead offering a third instantiation of the pattern established in chapters 2–5. Largen first expositis the narratives of Krishna's and Jesus's adulthoods in the *Mahābhārata*, the *Bhagavad Gītā* and *Uddhava Gītā*, and the Gospel of Luke (chap. 6), respectively. Then, in chapter 7, she more fully develops the themes of erotic love and playfulness from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*; themes of surprise, relationship, and embodiment from the canonical gospels; and themes of the miraculous in the everyday, spontaneous laughter, and even capricious anger from the extracanonical gospels. The book concludes by leaving this list of insights as just that: a disconnected list, with little of the coherence so deftly illustrated in the previous expositions.

Largen writes with enviable clarity, and her study is appropriately well-delimited and modest. Nevertheless, her conclusion is just one of several places where specialist readers in particular will find themselves wanting more. The style of *Baby Krishna, Infant Christ* is intentionally introductory, keeping technical vocabulary and scholarly apparatus to a minimum. This extends not only to Largen's own prose but also to the sources she cites most frequently. In addition, though she provides explanatory notes and a useful selected bibliography for further study, the work does not significantly engage prior comparative studies of incarnation, *avatāra*, and devotion in these two traditions—including those of Clooney and Eck. There is, finally, no theory of narrative or aesthetics to give the work analytic heft. In these ways, the work falls short of its own great potential.

Perhaps, however, such disappointment merely reflects a necessary consequence of Largen's greater ambition, namely, to facilitate a direct, imaginative encounter with the God revealed in the young Krishna and in the infant Christ, a God who upsets expectations and meets humankind with a passionate love beyond the bounds of systematic reason. There is in this work an appeal to a *naïveté* that is anything but naïve, an appeal to the popular Krishna of Janmāṣṭamī and Holī and the popular Christ of Christmastide as genuine resources for Christian reflection. As such, the book is both effective and affective, offering a comparative theology suitable to the undergraduate classroom and the pastor's library.

REID B. LOCKLIN, *St. Michael's College, University of Toronto.*

BYRNE, MÁIRE. *The Names of God in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. New York: Continuum, 2011. xi+171 pp. \$34.95 (paper).

The title of Máire Byrne's book, along with that of the author's initial chapter—"Interfaith Dialogue and Comparative Theology"—announces an exploration of the names of God in the three Abrahamic faiths by a scholar of Hebrew and Christian scriptures who offers a detailed analysis of divine names in each of these traditions with a view to facilitating interfaith dialogue. An initial reflection on the need for a common language triggered this work, whose aim is "to attempt to locate some sort of starting place for locating common or universal language in order to assist inter-religious dialogue" (2). By "language," Byrne means conceptual frameworks that are intertranslatable, and so she turns to Francis X. Clooney and Norbert Hintersteiner for help in negotiating this effort with strategies already developed in the growing discipline of "comparative theology." Once that methodological approach has been noted, however, each tradition's way of treating "divine names" is presented serially, with little cross-reflection on the way different uses of divine names in each tradition might affect the other. The result is a competent overview of each tradition, understandably richer for Judaism and Christianity (with which the author has a working familiarity) than for Islam. In fact, the presentation of the names themselves bears no documentation—as it would, for example, were it taken from Ghazali's classical treatise. Nor is there any discussion of the role that recitation of the "ninety-nine beautiful names" plays in the life of ordinary Muslim believers, who will regularly have learned them by heart in a canonical order. Indeed, one will see Muslims, instead of fretting while having to wait in line, working through their thirty-three beads, associating a name with each bead for a triple round of the prayer beads, to make ninety-nine.

A concluding chapter, "Comparative Theologies and the Names of God," addresses two potentially fraught issues: God as creator and God as father. Byrne's goal in presenting the differing approaches to these two issues in the Abrahamic traditions is to show how "one can learn more about one's own religion, and not have to put aside the principles and beliefs of one's own faith in order to do this" (112). The usual complaints about using "father" for God could be attenuated by the very fact that this name is omitted in Islam, with ninety-nine alternatives offered in its place, which suggests that it might be "foolish to try to explain or teach about God or the theology of God with such a strong focus on God as Father" (131). In making that suggestion, Byrne wishes "to benefit from using Islamic thought and in this case the 99 Most Beautiful Names as an alternative platform from which to scrutinize our own Christian theology of God" (131). Yet she had already extensively canvassed pros and cons regarding using the name "Father" in a Christian context (51–75), concluding that the "way in which ['father' and cognate] terms have been interpreted has less to do with their context and their origins than with their reception and interpretation throughout history" (74–75). So it seems that little comparative fruit can be gained from Islam here, while the suggestion that using many names could relativize excessive focus on the single name "Father" quite overlooks Jesus's own endorsement of that singular name.

"Creator" offers a richer field of comparison, however, for Jews and Christians share the book of Genesis while the Qur'an enunciates repeatedly "God says 'be' and it is!" Yet the author finds it necessary to introduce the contestable "idea that one being could dominate our lives and have the power of life, death, and existence," making it "difficult for modern Christians to reconcile with their view of God" (127). Yet one wonders whether that descriptor properly fits the creating God in the full context of the Bible, and even more whether the author's presumed "Muslim idea that the deity is powerful and controlling" (129) adequately reflects the Qur'an. Certainly, "dominating" and "controlling" are conceptions that are more

modern than they are biblical or Qur'anic. Yet it could well be the case that some believers in each tradition could have such skewed images of the creator, so the author proposes that believers "can learn more about their own idea of God and how they image or imagine God by reflecting on both the similarities and differences in the image among the three faiths" (129).

That refrain becomes the parting recommendation of this careful delineation of each of the Abrahamic faiths with regard to naming God. Yet the authentic fruit of the comparative theological approach that the author recommends can hardly be limited to such propaedeutic remarks, though it could well arise from comparisons as detailed and probing as the individual accounts of naming in each faith. Perhaps such reflection is meant to emerge from students working with this study, but it would stand a better chance of doing so were the comparative examples more substantial than those given. Moreover, such examples could well have been gleaned from current studies, which might have suggested a mode of exploration more attuned to learning from other faiths in this substantive way.

DAVID BURRELL, CSC, *University of Notre Dame*.

GRENHOLM, CRISTINA. *Motherhood and Love: Beyond the Gendered Stereotypes of Theology*. Translated by MARIE TÅQVIST. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2011. xx+204 pp. \$25.00 (paper).

In her most recent book, the Swedish theologian Cristina Grenholm intends both to develop an understanding of motherhood that "does not presuppose or bring about the subordination of women" (15) and to use that conception of motherhood to provide new insights into Christian and non-Christian reflections on love. In particular, she examines the doctrine of Mary as virgin mother and the biblical accounts of the Annunciation, critiquing the former and reinterpreting the latter in order to develop her own conception of love.

Grenholm's approach is hermeneutical; she begins with the assertions that "all life is interpreted" and that Christianity is a "worldview," or an interpretation of "life" (ix). She offers a plethora of definitional terms: "Christian templates" are "short, authorized formulations of doctrine," such as "God is triune" (71). These doctrines can be a starting point for the hermeneutical process, a preunderstanding from which critical reflection can begin and richer theological meaning can be unpacked. Conversely, such doctrines can become "petrified dogmas," as in the case of the doctrine of the virgin mother, Mary (71). In a similar process, gender stereotypes reflect a petrification of gender meanings that are assigned to the biological reality of sex through a "genderization process" (24).

Grenholm thus proposes parallel processes of critical reflection. We should reflect on doctrine by placing it into dialogue with "life" and with "critical theology," which "raises questions related to life or doctrine" (77). Critical theology can raise questions, for example, about the relation between Mary's status as virgin mother and Mary's own humanity, addressed through an account of the lived experience of motherhood. Critical gender theory can investigate the "empirical relationships" between biological sex and gender construction, particularly as they are expressed in understandings of motherhood (80). These two parallel hermeneutical processes must be accompanied by yet a third: "scriptural criticism," which incorporates reflection on biblical texts, doctrine, and "context." By "context," Grenholm appears to mean the particular questions brought by the interpreter to text and doctrine, but this is not made explicit. It is also not clear how we are to differentiate between a "Christian template" and a "petrified dogma."

With respect to the project at hand, Grenholm explores her category of “life” through a “realistic” account of the lived experience of motherhood. In conversation with theologians and philosophers of motherhood such as Sara Ruddick, Paula Cooley, and the Swedish philosopher Ulla Holm, Grenholm points to the “ambiguity” of motherhood, contesting romanticized ideals of the mother. Mothers cannot be perfect. The image and doctrine of the virgin motherhood of Mary places regular mothers in a bind, as they cannot simultaneously be virgins and mothers.

Grenholm then reflects on biblical accounts of Mary, focusing in particular on Mary’s pregnancy as an experience of vulnerability. Grenholm differentiates between vulnerability as that which is “enveloped in love” and “exposure,” or exploited vulnerability (121). She then defines love as “the good presence of someone in vulnerability; it prevents vulnerability from becoming exposure, and it constitutes a defense against oppression” (121). The story of the Annunciation thus becomes an example of divine love that supports and protects the vulnerable—here, the pregnant woman.

In like manner, Grenholm differentiates between “hierarchy,” which she consistently describes as patriarchal and bad, and “asymmetry,” or inequalities that do not involve exploitation. Hierarchy involves “power,” a term that Grenholm consistently uses with a negative valence. Beyond this, Grenholm offers no criteria to distinguish asymmetrical relations from hierarchical ones. More nuance is certainly called for here, although Grenholm’s focus on the possibility of “good” inequality, or asymmetry, is important in light of the tendency of some contemporary thinkers to push too insistently for equality in every relationship (she treats Carter Heyward and Rita Nakashima Brock) or, conversely, to pattern ideal human relations on an utterly asymmetrical view of the God-human relationship (she discusses Anders Nygren).

Grenholm considers her proposal a new alternative to existing conceptions of Christian love, painting these with a rather broad brush: “In theology . . . love is conceived of as compatible with hierarchy. . . . Love is closely connected with power, and power is rarely problematized” (122). However, neither this description nor her book more generally adequately engages the rich Christian tradition of *caritas* theologies, of love as a desire for and a response to good as in Augustine and Aquinas, or of love as unconditional and joyful service of the needy neighbor, rooted in gratitude for grace, as in Luther or Kierkegaard. Grenholm could surely have fruitfully engaged Aquinas’s account of charity as friendship with God, a friendship that nevertheless involves asymmetry. One cannot avoid the perception that Grenholm is using an elaborate hermeneutical approach, involving an almost idiosyncratic choice of conversation partners, as an alternative to engaging a tradition that already has something to say about Christian love as a caring and protective presence with the vulnerable. This is fine; some choice of conversation partners is necessary, of course, but Grenholm’s conclusions are not as innovative as she suggests, nor is the Christian theological tradition so monolithic or bereft of similar insights.

Grenholm’s most helpful contribution is to call attention to the widespread unwillingness of contemporary human persons to acknowledge our vulnerability. An exploration of motherhood calls attention to the fact that we are all vulnerable, that vulnerability is an essential part of life, one that can be enveloped either in care and concern, as in her reading of the story of the Annunciation to Mary, or in exploitation. She asserts that “motherhood as a paradigmatic love relationship can teach us something about God’s love” (179), namely, that “God loves us as mothers love their children” (159). While this is an attractive prospect, one that many Christians, including this one, may wish to embrace, it is not clear that we need to traverse her long methodological road to reach this basic theological proposition.

SANDRA SULLIVAN-DUNBAR, *Loyola University Chicago*.

BIGGAR, NIGEL. *Behaving in Public: How to Do Christian Ethics*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2011. xvii+124 pp. \$16.00 (paper).

The American political cycle may or may not have inspired the timing of *Behaving in Public*, this thoughtful little book on Christian political behavior. However, if any of the major players in the Republican presidential primary had read and heeded it, the 2012 election season would have looked very different. For what Nigel Biggar proposes is a Christian political speech that is inspired not by raw pragmatism, fear, or identity politics but by careful theological reflection on the whole arc of Christian soteriology. He argues that the alternatives regnant in contemporary Christian culture—a too-malleable liberal apologetics and an orthodoxy preoccupied with Christian distinctiveness—not only are ineffective politically but squander Christians’ best chances to speak both authentically and usefully. Fans and students of James Gustafson—Biggar’s doctoral mentor, to whom this book is dedicated—will recognize a number of Gustafson’s trademark themes running under the surface: a careful blending of Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth; a whiff of H. Richard Niebuhr (*Christ and Culture* [New York, 1951]); an appreciation of the distinctive methods and audiences of prophetic, narrative, ethical, and policy discourses (see James Gustafson’s own *Varieties of Moral Discourse* [Grand Rapids, MI, 1988]); and a ferocious vigilance over the vulnerable middle principles on which foundational claims so often go awry on their way to concrete moral guidelines.

Biggar’s succinct, clear chapters had their origins as the Oxford McDonald Lectures. His goal is to steer between a liberal politics that eschews religious language (represented by Jürgen Habermas) and radical orthodoxy—but especially in the first and last chapters of his book, he argues more actively against representatives of the latter movement, particularly Stanley Hauerwas and John Milbank. Because “the actual world is not always hostile” (9), Biggar argues, a prophetic stance is often inappropriate; rather, cultivating a humility born of the realization of universal human sinfulness, Christians “should be open hearing God’s Word from the lips of the apparently indifferent and godless” (87). Because all non-Christians are potential members of the community of the church and because all Christians are sinners, Christian distinctiveness is no virtue in the world Biggar paints. He counters that in place of distinctiveness, a discriminating integrity ensures that “the ethical concepts used are sufficiently shaped at all the appropriate points by relevant moments in the whole theological narrative” and strives “to do generous justice to the awkward particulars” above which he believes radical orthodoxy tends to hover abstractly (23, 111).

What are the consequences for Christian political speech? The Christian witness will never be “tied down” neatly (90) but will alternate among prophecy, clarification of ambiguity, collaborative deliberation, and other strategies (107–8). In addition, Christian integrity occupies a “plural place of polyglot negotiation and compromise over temporal, public goods” (61); thus, like its conversation partners, it will sometimes need to refer to its theological commitments. This strategy must never be a trump card or shortcut. Rather, respectful of the differently minded, it reveals the vision and values that underlie the speaker’s opinion (68–71).

Biggar crosscuts this guide to Christian political speech with another via media claim: Barthian Thomism (chap. 2, 107–12). His basic conviction is Thomist: the created order precedes, grounds, and creates the framework both for ethics and for the salvation narrative. Barth’s seriousness about sin introduces a healthy skepticism about the human ability to describe and desire the good consistently and reminds Thomism that creation is not self-referential but is oriented toward salvation after all. Thomism returns to chide Barth for moving too quickly from theological premise to

sweeping moral conclusions, forgetting the flexibly forged casuistry that connects the abstract with the practical. And, in their own way, both affirm that humanity is unimaginable without the desire for God and for the good. Graced nature and human sinfulness are the theological universals that ground Biggar's argument.

The refreshing, thoroughly reasoned book has two important limitations. First, it addresses mainly the approaches of contemporary white, Christian, and primarily male elites in the United States and Britain who draw on the work of Habermas and others to debate the political implications of pluralism and determine the proper way to function in the democratic "public square." The strategies of scores of politically active Christians in those countries and around the globe who care little for these discussions receive only implicit attention. In particular, few female Christian thinkers or theologians of color are captivated by the "public square" framing. This is not Biggar's fault; he is responding usefully to a particular, active, academic debate. But it is doubtful that his words will have the broad influence on Christian rhetoric that he desires until the tensions he addresses are transformed in a direction that captures the imagination of these other Christians.

Second, for theological reasons Biggar eschews both capitulation to liberal conventional wisdom and a "Christ against culture" stance, whether shrill or cloaked in an inviting narrative. But both conventional wisdom and Christian identity stances are easily recognizable, easily reduced to slogans, and easily used to recruit followings. While Biggar's principled flexibility certainly fulfills its claim to integrity, it may be difficult to transform into a political brand even briefly enough to turn a concrete debate—which is a pity for all of us. And yet Biggar's point is that a Christian politics is about tone and behavior, not about votes. It is the humble, compassionate, but clear-eyed witness of hopeful sinners to other sinners whom God also loves and inspires.

The book's primary audience will be Christian ethicists. It will also find an audience among religious studies scholars interested in mapping religious thinkers' approaches to secular, democratic politics. It is most appropriate for MA- and PhD-level courses, but it is also suitable for advanced undergraduates and savvy book-discussion groups.

CRISTINA L. H. TRAINA, *Northwestern University*.

MARTIN-SCHRAMM, JAMES B. *Climate Justice: Ethics, Energy, and Public Policy*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010. xxiii + 232 pp. \$20.00 (paper).

James B. Martin-Schramm has written an accessible, comprehensive, and ultimately hopeful Christian reflection on current energy options against the backdrop of global climate disruption. The book has grown out of an interdisciplinary course on US energy policies that the author, professor of religion at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, has taught for many years. The book also reflects his work on the social statement "Energy Policy and Global Warming" issued by the Presbyterian Church (USA [PCUSA]) in 2008.

The underlying conviction of Martin-Schramm's book is that global climate change is not just a matter of sustainability but also very much one of social justice; for "those who are the most affected and least able to adapt to global climate change are also those who have least contributed to the problem" (xi). A Christian response to climate change, therefore, should be about "climate justice" and should demand an "equitable distribution of the burdens associated with mitigating greenhouse gas emissions and adaptation to global climate" between current and future generations as well as the rich and the poor (xi).

Martin-Schramm's book sets out to accomplish "climate justice" by utilizing an ethics of eco-justice. Unlike a conservation or preservation ethics, an eco-justice ethics "addresses human-caused problems that threaten both human and natural communities and considers both human and natural communities to be ethically important" (26). Developed first by the World Council of Churches and utilized by the PCUSA, an eco-justice framework centers on four norms: sustainability, efficiency, solidarity, and participation. Martin-Schramm's book expands on these norms and develops specific guidelines that allow him to morally assess conventional and alternative energy sources (chaps. 2 and 3) as well as national and international energy policies (chaps. 4 and 5).

Climate Justice first introduces the social and environmental challenges posed by the world's heavy reliance on fossil fuels (coal, oil, and natural gas), with climate change as the most haunting and unprecedented of these challenges. Martin-Schramm does not spill any ink on denials of either the reality of global warming or its urgency; he simply reiterates the findings and the warnings of the "Fourth Assessment Report" (2007) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. This is both a strength and a weakness. It is a strength in that the extent and seriousness of the crisis demands that we move beyond denial and focus on constructive solutions. However, because this book is aimed not just at the author's fellow ethicists but also at clergy and laypeople, failing to deal with the criticisms and naysayers may leave certain readers unconvinced of the moral urgency of the problem.

Having introduced the ethical challenges that come with our dependence on fossil fuel, Martin-Schramm spells out in chapter 1 the biblical and theological foundations of the eco-justice norms. Because these norms are culled from ecumenical discussions within the World Council of Churches and have been widely accepted by churches in the United States, they have strong currency as a tool for a Christian moral assessment of energy options and policies. The author reminds his readers, however, that from a Christian perspective these norms are an expression of God's justice as love and, hence, involve a special concern for the poor and powerless. While not pursuing a liberationist ethics in the strictest sense, Martin-Schramm is adamant that a Christian climate justice is not a mere weighing of interest against interest but, rather, must advocate for those who do not have a voice. This, in turn, colors both his interpretation of the eco-justice norms and the subsequent guidelines as well as the way these norms are utilized in assessing energy options and policies. For instance, when discussing international policy, Martin-Schramm advocates an interpretation of justice focused not on equality but on equity and merit. Thus, he argues that the costs of the mitigation of greenhouse gases should be distributed according to the ability to pay and that climate-related burdens should be borne by those who have contributed most to global warming. Following *Greenhouse Development Rights Framework: The Right to Development in a Climate Constrained World* (Durban, 2007), he further insists that the interests and voices of people who are poor and disenfranchised are best served when national capacity for climate mitigation is calculated based on the number of people in a country whose income exceeds the development threshold and not, as is common, on gross domestic income.

The sixth, and final, chapter of the book discusses the work Luther College is doing to reduce its own greenhouse gas emissions. As a charter signatory of the American College and University Presidents' Climate Commitment, Luther College not only strives to achieve climate neutrality but also to make sustainability a part of every student's learning experience. Because global climate disruption is as much a communal sin as it is an individual wrongdoing, addressing it by way of institutional change makes good theological sense. It also makes practical sense. For while individual lifestyle changes should be incorporated into an ecologically minded Chris-

tianity, limiting the carbon footprint of colleges, universities, churches, and hospitals has a larger impact and involves Christians even more actively in forcing societal changes toward a more sustainable energy future.

Martin-Schramm's book provides an excellent educational resource for churches, colleges, and seminaries interested in engaging the ethical issues raised by our current energy options and policies. It is comprehensive in its treatment of conventional and nonconventional energy options, and its extensive discussion of national and international policy will bring many readers up-to-date on the intricacies and dilemmas of current political developments. Teachers will no doubt enjoy the book's companion website, which provides additional resources, including teaching notes, exam questions, and links to key sources of information on energy options and climate policy.

The book does less well as a critical analysis of how global capitalism tends to work against a transition to renewable energy sources. While Martin-Schramm is critical of the world's collective efforts thus far to address climate change, he is not interested in providing a critique of current economic and political structures and ideologies. Informed by Luther's teaching of the two kingdoms, the underlying theological assumption of Martin-Schramm's book is that our worldly kingdom will never be perfect. Accordingly, its focus is on what can be achieved within existing structures. When one accepts this perspective, Martin-Schramm's book is hopeful—if only moderately so, given the seriousness of our current predicament.

HILDA KOSTER, *Concordia College*.

KAO, GRACE Y. *Grounding Human Rights in a Pluralist World*. Advancing Human Rights Series. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011. viii+239 pp. \$29.95 (paper).

Grounding Human Rights in a Pluralist World, Grace Kao's critical and constructive contribution to discourse on the present legitimation crisis of human rights is the rare nuanced academic treatment of a complex issue that reads somewhat like a fast-paced cliff-hanger. In this concise text, Kao explains the need to address the grounds for universal human rights and the difficulties with the prevailing approaches to the legitimation issue, and she signals a new direction that draws on the strengths and insights of each of the extant approaches.

Kao's book addresses the fact that the global community has never identified or agreed upon why each human being ought to be entitled to certain liberties, benefits, and procedures that all other human beings must respect. Despite a fairly widespread consensus *that* we humans have certain minimal rights, our different ways and means of grounding such rights seem so fundamentally different that movement toward a consensus about *why* appears unobtainable. But if we lack a coherent set of principled reasons for the minimal standard of treatment to which all human beings are entitled, we may be helpless to counter the manifold justifications for evading that standard. Rather than being absolute, unconditional principles that always pertain to the treatment of all people, human rights risk being hypothetical, contingent, always vulnerable to being overridden by other considerations.

Kao divides approaches to this challenge into two broad categories: the maximalist approach, which denies that human rights can be conceptually sound without some fairly robust account of the human being and what precisely it is about that particular class of beings that warrants a set of claims; and the minimalist approach, which aims to articulate the best course of action to improve human rights protection without having to rely on contentious premises about their grounds.

In sum, maximalist approaches affirm that human rights are unavoidably religious and that unqualified moral standards must be rooted in a comprehensive referent that transcends the vagaries of history and culture. But by answering the question of why human beings ought to be regarded with dignity and respect by reference to a particular account of the nature and meaning of existence as a whole, maximalist theorists end up preaching to their own choirs. By purporting to offer *the* universal ground for human value and worth, such approaches are ultimately unable to contend with the fact of value pluralism and the deep religious divisions that characterize the contemporary world.

Kao is sympathetic to the maximalist challenge that without “some basic account of who or what human beings fundamentally *are* and should be able to *be* and *do*, we will not be able to employ the powerful charge that some ways of treating human beings are simply ‘inhumane’ and accordingly ought to be universally prohibited” (153). However, she denies that the only way to ground such an account is within a particular religious framework. Rather, she appeals to an ethical realist approach that is committed to the objective truth of fundamental moral distinctions between right and wrong and that posits the real and equal value of human beings qua human beings. Her basic account of what it means to be human is informed by the fact of certain natural limitations and constraints, vulnerabilities, wants, and needs shared by all human persons. She thus urges recourse to an amalgam of minimalist and maximalist insights about justifying human rights, holding fast to the unequivocal truth of human value yet relying on the plurality of global communities to articulate its ground.

Reading through the critical chapters and marveling at the impressive speed and precision with which she dispatches each alternative, I was eager to read Kao’s constructive contribution. However, the few pages focused on this alternative approach left me wanting to know more about how it was justified and how it would work. While I share Kao’s conviction that human rights ultimately depend on the truth of the fundamental moral equality of all human persons, and share her frustration with the minimalist willingness to elide this point, and share her dissatisfaction with the monopoly of distinctively religious designs on the topic of human value, I was ultimately left disappointed by what she has left unsaid. While she asserts that we “must posit the real and equal value of human beings to understand fully the moral imperative in international human rights law” (155), what is missing is an articulation of the method of justifying this hypothesis. Ethical realism is meant to address Kao’s concern that extant minimalist attempts to ground human rights fail to adequately respond to the maximalist challenge. However, without some guidance about how it may be possible to validate our conjecture about our common humanity, her approach suffers the same fate. This may help us to understand why religious maximalists have dominated the field. They are often able to sidestep the issue of proof by falling back on their faith in the authenticity of revelations from an unimpeachable source.

But if there are, in fact, certain natural limitations and constraints, vulnerabilities, wants, and needs that are shared by all human persons, then in principle it ought to be possible to demonstrate the truth of that claim. Here the insights of communicative ethics may be able to help. How does anyone know what it is like to be human? First, through the existential activity of being. But our encounters with the human condition are universally valid, able to inform us about what it means to be human rather than a particular specimen of the species, only to the extent that these existential experiences are shared.

What seems to be missing from the approaches that Kao surveys and her own offering is how we get to *why* we ought to have certain rights secured. Communicative

ethics offers discourse as the putative how. The justificatory force of coming to tentative agreement about which attributes of our individual experiences are shared more broadly, through a process of argument, discussion, and debate, can validate hypotheses about the content of our common humanity in a manner that is both ethically realistic and respectful of cultural differences.

Think, for example, of how the expansion of recognition of rights for homosexual partnerships resulted from public discourse. The dominant social, political, and cultural majority had long assumed that their heterosexual desires for intimacy and relationship were universal attributes of the human experience. But after public political argument, discussion, and debate about the homosexual experience, the dominant majority has begun to revise its account of the nature and content of the universal human experience. Yes, the desire for intimacy and relationship does seem to be commonly shared. But for a significant minority, this desire is not heterosexual in form. Through discourse, the understanding of the nature of the common human experience has shifted, our views of the fundamental right to intimacy and partnership are being revised, and legal protections are being amended. Although this book review is not an adequate forum in which to fully develop this example or to adequately defend communicative ethics, the point is to illustrate how discourse draws on diverse perspectives and understandings to illuminate fundamental commonality.

Overall, Kao's text is an immensely valuable contribution to human rights discourse. Her clear, cogent summaries of the contemporary challenges in human rights theory will be of particular value in the classroom, as will her initial chapter on cultural relativism and ethnocentrism. This chapter, in particular, should be required reading in all ethics classes. Too often students who have begun developing critical thinking skills become so invested in acknowledging the provisional nature of what they believe to be true that they resist moving beyond that point to considering value realism. The first chapter of *Grounding Human Rights in a Pluralist World* will guide students beyond this early stage of intellectual development.

BARBRA BARNETT, *Loyola University New Orleans*.

LANGER, RUTH. *Cursing the Christians? A History of the Birkat Ha-Minim*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. 400 pp. \$74.00 (cloth).

Once upon a theological time, religions indulged themselves in triumphalist statements with regard to other persuasions. They portrayed themselves as specially spiritual and others as blind, ignorant, subhuman, and untrustworthy, to cite just a few of the delicate epithets they applied to their competitors for divine favor. And, of course, they sought to involve God in their prejudices by invoking divine assistance in finishing off the opposition. When Christians in Europe and Muslims in Asia held sway in the premodern period, they compounded their persecution of the Jews by insulting them in their prayers and readings. But the Jews were not so backward in coming forward with their own slurs on non-Jewish faiths. While they generally lacked the power to abuse physically, they derived some satisfaction in employing prayers that could, at least in the minds of the worshipper if not according to the original intent of the compiler, offer them the prospect of demeaning their persecutors.

One of the benedictions of Rabbinic Judaism used in the daily office known as the *amidah* was (and is) entitled the *birkat ha-minim*; it called upon God to rid the world of heretics (*minim*) and apostates as well as of any powerful enemies that were harass-

sing God's chosen people. At one stage, this benediction—or, rather, this curse, as it effectively was—was also aimed at Christians (*nošerim*). Was it originally worded to attack the followers of Jesus? Did the Jews of the Middle Ages use it in this way? Were the “powerful enemies” the Holy Roman Empire and/or the Islamic empires? What date may be ascribed to the earliest formulation of *birkat ha-minim*? Does Jewish liturgical history document any process of evolution in the texts and interpretation of the benediction? How do contemporary expressions of Judaism deal with this prayer?

Ruth Langer, who teaches Jewish studies in the Theology Department of Boston College and is associate director of its Center for Christian-Jewish Learning, is one of the few serious American students of Jewish liturgy in all the historical, theological, and linguistic manifestations that it has demonstrated over a period of at least two millennia. She has set about answering all these questions, and many more, and her volume will undoubtedly function for a long time as one of the essential reference books on the topic. She makes it clear throughout the study that she is not only interested in tracing the complex textual history of the benediction but also keen to plumb the depths of its religious meaning for generations of Jews in various countries and environments. In addition, she is anxious to improve relations between Jews and people of other faiths, feeling passionately that “after Christians (especially Catholics and Lutherans) have struggled to address issues in their liturgy, should Jews not do the same?” (12) and describing her volume as “a modest contribution to the process of Jewish self-criticism” (185).

After carefully examining all the sources of the first few Christian centuries, Langer concludes that it is impossible to uncover the original purpose and wording of the benediction but argues cogently and persuasively that it constituted a curse that “acted as a deterrent to active participation by *minim* in the synagogue prayers” (26), where *minim* could be various sorts of miscreants in different times and places. From the third century, but no earlier, it may have been employed in Byzantine Palestine to refer to Jewish Christians or Christians. In the post-Talmudic period, references are made in *birkat ha-minim* to “Jews who to a greater or lesser degree challenge the boundaries of communal behavior as established by the rabbis” (53), but the Jewish prayers continue to be “liturgy in significant flux” (64), as is clearly demonstrated by the vast numbers of variant texts discovered in the past 115 years in the various collections of manuscripts from the Cairo Genizah.

Clinically identifying Christian polemics and Jewish apologetics of the High Middle Ages precisely for what they were, Langer succeeds in offering the reader a rich and colorful tapestry that tells the story of how Christians bitterly resented and forcefully attacked the benediction. For their own part, and in order to protect themselves, Jews became so obsessed with proving that it was not anti-Christian that it ultimately came to be authoritatively interpreted in alternative ways. In the fourteenth century, Moshe Ha-Kohen of Tordesillas may have been dissembling when he stated that the Jews could not have Christians in mind “because you are our sustainers with food and income, for you provide us with sustenance among you and from what is yours we eat and drink and clothe and cover ourselves” (98); but, as the Middle Ages gave way to the modern world, Jews certainly appear to have been convinced by their own arguments.

In that modern world, the moves toward emancipation, equality, and religious freedom brought with them a determination on the part of most Jews, from the neo-Orthodox to the Reform, to see in the *birkat ha-minim* singularly different religious statements from those that underlay its earliest senses and intents. The censorship of texts, both Christian and self-imposed, the development of mystical

ideologies, and the role of the forced convert in the premodern period all played a part in ensuring that the original curse against competitive forms of faith “was transformed into one against evil and evil doers in general” (102). This transformation, as punctiliously explained by Langer, took the form of reinterpretation of content, obfuscation through translation, textual adjustment, and even elimination, depending on the overall religious stance of those formulating the relevant new prayer book. Consequently, few contemporary Christians of any religious balance continue to polemicize against the benediction.

The author complements her historical survey with five appendixes, which cite a wealth of texts from a variety of medieval and modern sources; with almost one hundred pages of endnotes; and with very extensive indexes. Enthusiastic about theology, cautious about history, and accurate about manuscript study, Langer has provided us with an impressive textual and theological history of an intriguing piece of rabbinic liturgy.

STEFAN C. REIF, *University of Cambridge*.

THEISSEN, MATTHEW. *Contesting Conversion: Genealogy, Circumcision, and Identity in Ancient Judaism and Christianity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. x+246 pp. \$65.00 (cloth).

Matthew Theissen effectively makes his case in his book *Contesting Conversion*, originally a dissertation supervised by Joel Marcus at Duke University. His argument, in brief, is that in addition to the generally accepted possibility of conversion in Second Temple Judaism via circumcision for males, a minority strain continued to define Jewishness by way of descent, legitimized by circumcision on the eighth day. Thus, they contended, circumcision later in life for purposes of conversion could not render one a Jew. Knowing the vitality of this view in some circles casts a very new light on the author of Luke-Acts, who did not break with Jewish views of circumcision, as most think, but rather maintained the minority view that conversion of Gentiles was not really possible. Theissen questions whether the apparent porosity of boundaries between Jews and Gentiles was evidence of proselytizing or conversion. He equally rejects its corollary, that Luke and Paul denied the value of circumcision, against their opponents who upheld its importance. On the contrary, Luke and Paul limited it to Jews by birth.

Theissen traces the beginnings of this strain of “genealogy alone” to Genesis 17:14: “And the uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.” He argues that the addition of “the eighth day” by the Septuagint, Samaritan Pentateuch, and *Jubilees* is the better reading of this verse from the Priestly writer. In the Second Temple period, this strain appears in 4QMMT and *The Animal Apocalypse*. Furthermore, resentment of Herod and his family in multiple sources stress his descent from Idumean converts.

Building a case that begins with a text-critical argument that favors minority readings seems problematic, but Theissen parries that no version of the verse corresponding to the Masoretic text appears early. His argument that the Masoretic text version arose because later Jews were open to conversion and therefore dropped “on the eighth day,” however, risks circularity. One might also question his use of the anti-Herodian sentiment as evidence of anticonvert sentiment. He argues that if the descendants of the Idumean converts received a chilly reception, no other converts could expect a warm one. But the Herods seem a special case, in that they were

forced to convert, acted as functionaries of the Roman state, and used their power to punish other Jews.

Theissen's work shows that circumcision is something of a riddle. If it is not a "sacramental" rite, like baptism, that changes a person's status, what is circumcision for? Although required of all Israelite males on the eighth day, it does not in itself make the male individual part of Israel. A non-Jewish boy circumcised, even on the eighth day, is not a Jew. But a male Jew by birth who could not be circumcised for reasons of health or persecution would still be a Jew. The circumcision of the Schemites in Genesis 34 after the rape/seduction of Dinah does not render them part of Israel. Half the Jewish population, of course, is not circumcised. Thus, circumcision seems a necessary marker, when joined with genealogy, but has incomplete efficacy. *Jubilees* includes the idea of circumcision as an apotropaic sign against malevolent angelic beings. Theissen's elision of circumcision and conversion, therefore, can occasionally be confusing since they are clearly not identical.

Theissen builds a careful and reasonable case for a minority view of genealogy alone, but he also needs to prove that this minority view is held by the author of Luke-Acts. Here is where he brings to the fore some frequently overlooked facts. Luke does indeed stress circumcision on the eighth day, in the circumcision of both Jesus and John (Luke 1:59, 2:21). Stephen's speech in Acts emphasizes Isaac's circumcision on the eighth day (Acts 7:8) without mentioning Abraham's late-life circumcision. Acts 21 shows circumcision of one's children as the defining act of Jews (Acts 21:21), and the charge that Paul argues against it is clearly false. Quite compelling is Theissen's explanation of the menagerie of animals that descends in Peter's dream in Acts 10. The author argues that it is not about food laws at all but, instead, about God's healing of the divisions between Jews and Gentiles. The pure and impure animals are metaphors from the natural world that illustrate divisions in society. God heals the divisions between Jews and Gentiles without erasing the differences. Metaphorical use of the vision is appealing because it occurs in the context of Cornelius's conversion; because Theissen shows that the word *koinos* does not usually apply to food in cognate literature; and, I would add, because it would be an odd site in Acts for a meditation on *kashrut*.

The Jerusalem council decision in Acts 15 then looks different. It rejects circumcision for Gentiles not because the rite is not valued but because it is restricted to males of Israel on the eighth day. As Theissen states, "Luke believes that Jewish believers should still practice circumcision on their newborn males, while Gentile believers should not be circumcised" (13). Theissen's claim changes our understanding of Luke and other believers like him, who appear not as antinomian but as preserving minority views to the effect that conversion to Judaism is not really possible. This makes Luke highly congenial to some of the work done on Paul by John Gager, Pamela Eisenbaum, and others, which shows Paul as rejecting not circumcision itself but, rather, its benefit for Gentiles, who are saved by Christ. Theissen's work further contributes to the continued parsing of varieties of Jewish and Christian interaction and identity, operative in recent decades. This work also fits well with that of recent scholars who argue that religion is a subset of ethnicity.

At first, Theissen's arguments can look precarious, arguing from minor readings or claiming that "Rise Peter, kill and eat" (Acts 10:13) is not really about food. Yet he carefully clears away the problems and makes his argument in measured steps. Theissen shows that we cannot treat questions about broad, sensitive issues such as circumcision and conversion as having a single response. Then, as now, the issue of who belongs in the Jewish community and how they may join remains fraught.

CLAUDIA SETZER, *Manhattan College*.

LIVESEY, NINA E. *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe 295. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010. x+198 pp.

In *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, Nina Livesey pursues close readings of several Jewish texts from the Roman period, insisting that circumcision as both a practice and a sign should be interpreted contextually. As Livesey shows, the Christian habit of viewing circumcision as a symbol of an allegedly perverse Jewish commitment to the flesh—found as early as in the writings of second-century Christians and present in newer, revised forms in modern New Testament scholarship—does serious injustice to the complexity of ancient Jewish points of view, including those of the proto-Christian Paul of Tarsus. When ancient declarations about “the foreskinned” and “the circumcised” are read within their own distinct literary contexts, circumcision turns out not to have a single meaning at all; rather, multivalence was its most important feature.

Based on a revised 2007 dissertation, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol* has the advantage of offering the sort of close philological work one expects from a focused study of a single subject. Beginning with a review of statements about circumcision in *Jubilees* and the Maccabean books, Livesey demonstrates the importance of linguistic and cultural precision when addressing such a loaded topic. The meanings invested in circumcision by the writer of 1 Maccabees were not shared either by the writer of *Jubilees* or by the writers of 2 and 4 Maccabees, each of whom employed circumcision to address their own particular concerns. Whereas *Jubilees* finds in circumcision an irrevocable guarantee of group membership, 1 Maccabees views the practice as a sign of loyalty to the Hasmoneans; 2 Maccabees equates circumcision with pious sacrifice; and 4 Maccabees spiritualizes the act, understanding the cutting away of foreskins as a symbol of the victory of reason over passion. Generalization across even these sources is therefore impossible, though all four ostensibly address the same crisis—the circumstances in Judea during the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Livesey reiterates this point throughout her book, emphasizing the unique perspectives of Josephus, Philo, and Paul in turn. She concludes with a history of Christian interpretation, arguing that later reception of the ancient Jewish practice of circumcision seriously misrepresents the perspectives put forward in earlier Jewish and proto-Christian works. Later universalizing theological claims about what circumcision must always and in every case mean are both inaccurate and anti-Jewish, whether put forward by Martin Luther or eminent New Testament scholars working in academia today.

The heart of the discussion lies in Livesey’s chapter on Paul, which is by far the longest treatment of a single writer in the book. An earlier chapter on Josephus suggests that, for this ancient historian, circumcision was a mark of commitment to Judaism. A chapter on Philo seeks to undermine the view that this philosophically oriented Alexandrian cared little for fleshly circumcision; although Philo did interpret the practice allegorically, he nevertheless regarded it as an essential Jewish act. The chapter on Paul then treats Galatians, Philippians, 1 Corinthians, and Romans in chronological order, arguing for multivalence within the Pauline corpus itself. According to Livesey, Paul’s teachings on circumcision were contextually bound: what he argues in one letter does not necessarily transfer to the next, and it is therefore inappropriate to find in Paul a single “theology of circumcision.” Nevertheless, the apostle is consistent on one point: Gentiles ought not to circumcise. In Livesey’s estimation, this perspective is rooted both in Paul’s belief in the Christ’s imminent return and in his sense that Gentiles should be included as Gentiles—and, therefore, with their foreskins intact. Paul defends his opinion creatively, either by metaphor-

ically circumcising Gentiles or by defining circumcision allegorically, but he never explicitly applies his arguments to fellow Jews, who, presumably, were expected to continue the practice.

By placing Paul's discussions of circumcision within an appropriate literary context, Livesey has succeeded both in relativizing his arguments and in challenging New Testament scholars who focus either too heavily or exclusively on canonical sources. Reading Paul's letters alone is not an adequate guide to his thinking, and viewing them together as if they present a single, consistent theological message is also a mistake. Circumcision was a culturally entrenched and yet contested practice, marking the body with signs of identity; beliefs about fertility; and, in the Roman period, disciplines of self-control and manly comportment. Livesey does not try to explain why genital cutting emerged as such an important literary and cultural symbol, nor does she address every possible ancient Jewish or Christian opinion on the topic, but she does a thorough job of showing just how diverse interpretations of the practice could be.

Livesey is to be commended for her helpful intervention in the long-standing but nevertheless offensive interpretive habit of regarding Paul as a Christian writer who sought to overturn a purportedly meaningless Jewish practice. Her analyses of other Jewish writings from the same historical period are also compelling. *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol* challenges readers to broaden their horizons and to remain attentive not only to what they, as Christians, wish Paul had said but also to what he did in fact say. Accompanied by a thorough bibliography and two detailed indexes, the book is a useful addition to what has become an important subject in biblical scholarship.

JENNIFER WRIGHT KNUST, *Boston University*.

WIMPFHEIMER, BARRY SCOTT. *Narrating the Law: A Poetics of Talmudic Legal Stories*. Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011. 239 pp. \$59.95 (cloth).

I remember reading, riveted, the first installment of Barry Wimpfheimer's prizewinning 2005 Columbia University doctoral dissertation. From the onset, I sensed that Wimpfheimer presents us with a new and genuinely helpful approach to Talmud, tearing down (and then partially rebuilding) the borders between rabbinic law and rabbinic narrative, and between rabbinic self-assertion and rabbinic self-critique. In *Narrating the Law*, the long-awaited revision of his dissertation, Wimpfheimer presents us with a coherent argument and a convincing new method for answering a question about the Talmud that William James once asked in a different context: "What do such large loose baggy monsters, with their queer elements of the accidental and the arbitrary, artistically mean?"

Wimpfheimer establishes that the legal narratives that are part of the loose baggy monsters that constitute Talmudic debates neither negate nor illustrate the law. Instead, the Talmudic editors artistically juxtapose these narratives (some of which may indeed first appear queer and accidental) to their legal debates in their attempt to learn from the prevailing tensions between legal theory and "the particulars of lived life that defy comfortable categorization" (12). The first five chapters of *Narrating the Law* are dedicated to smaller portions of legal discussions; the final, sixth, chapter considers the implication of the author's findings for the broader, overarching concerns of the Talmudic editorial process that produced the text as we have it today.

Wimpfheimer's language is crisp, clear, and elegant. His precision in both legal and literary analysis allows him to perceive the subtleties of Talmudic discourse without marshaling excessive theoretical baggage. He emphasizes his combined use of two

works that have been highly influential in the study of religion in the past years, Robert M. Cover's "Nomos and Narrative" ("The Supreme Court, 1982 Term-Forward: Nomos and Narrative," *Harvard Law Review* 97 [1983]: 4–68) and Mikhail Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination* (trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist [Austin, TX, 1981]). Especially the value of the latter for the study of rabbinic Judaism, including the Bavli, has been illustrated many times by Joshua Levinson in numerous articles as well as in his seminal study *The Twice-Told Tale: A Poetics of the Exegetical Narrative in Rabbinic Midrash* (in Hebrew [Jerusalem, 2005]); Wimpfheimer could have made better use of Levinson's work (but see 183). Wimpfheimer illustrates, based on Bakhtin and Cover, how traditional Jewish scholarship in its exclusive and reductionist focus on codified law tends to eclipse the dynamics of rabbinic legal narrative from the Gaonic period, through the Middle Ages, to the present day.

Just how much new ground Wimpfheimer has broken will take years to establish; I can but illustrate, as an example of his work's potential, how much he already has inspired my own work. Wimpfheimer's fourth chapter brilliantly analyzes the social and psychological dimensions of a brief debate in the Babylonian Talmud in which Rava faces off with his students. The Talmud, Wimpfheimer shows, is well aware how power relations and the anxieties they engender inform legal discourse. Yet the Talmud does even more than that, as I illustrate in dialogue with Wimpfheimer. Imitating its own legal discourse, it openly shows its fragility should the social order break down, as it does when the students turn on Rava as a band of mice that turn on the cat (see Holger Zellentin, *Rabbinic Parodies of Jewish and Christian Literature* [Tübingen, 2011]). Wimpfheimer, in other words, allows us to appreciate how the Talmud pre-empted by over a thousand years some aspects of Friedrich Nietzsche's idea of "genealogy" (popularized especially by Michel Foucault), which posits the discourse about the development of norms as prerequisite to any discussion of the norms' actual value (see also Moulie Vidas, *Tradition and the Formation of the Babylonian Talmud* [Princeton, NJ, forthcoming].)

What further type of research will follow *Narrating the Law*? One possibility may be to contextualize Wimpfheimer's lucid presentation of the ever-increasing legal prerogative within Jewish culture by considering the interaction of the editors of the Bavli with Sasanian law, and of the Gaonim with the early Muslim legal scholars. Even the codification of the Talmud should be revisited in the context of the need under the Rashidun Caliphate to produce a coherent law code. Wimpfheimer's study enables us to compare Talmudic law and culture to their contemporaneous counterparts with greater precision.

As an example for the potential of a further contextualization based on Wimpfheimer's study, the second chapter of *Narrating the Law* presents a case in which the rabbis respond to a man's lovesickness in a stern way, preferring that the patient die of grief rather than allowing him to see the desired woman (who is unable or unwilling to meet her suitor's desires) or even to speak to her. Wimpfheimer illustrates the prevailing tension between the actual law and the sick man's narrative. He rightly adduces the testimony of Greek literature, in which lovesickness is a common issue, and the typical Greek cure for lovesickness indeed is "sexual encounter" (54). The Talmud, however, could be placed in an even more nuanced and intimate dialogue with respective Greek attitudes. The Greek novels, for example, as opposed to the Greek medical literature, problematize extramarital and even prenuptial sex in a way that would allow an even sharper focus on the problem as stated in the Palestinian Talmud. Likewise, the Babylonian Talmud concludes its discussion of the same case by stating that marital intercourse is by definition devoid of pleasure and would therefore not satisfy the lovesick man. Wimpfheimer describes this suggestion as "bizarre"

(52, 61), which may actually be the Talmud's point, tongue in cheek. Yet the argument that sex was for procreation only, and should not *ever* be enjoyed, was current first among the Greco-Roman Stoics and became popularized with the rise of asceticism among Christians in Palestine as well as in Mesopotamia, again allowing us to take Wimpfheimer's study as a springboard for a further contextualization of the Talmud. *Narrating the Law*, to conclude, shows that the field of Talmudic studies is maturing as a discipline within the humanities and, as such, has reached a stage in which it may contribute to the shaping of the humanities more broadly.

HOLGER ZELENITIN, *University of Nottingham*.

DALSHEIM, JOYCE. *Unsettling Gaza: Secular Liberalism, Radical Religion, and the Israeli Settler Project*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 216 pp. \$74.00 (cloth).

Situated during the evacuation of the Israeli-Jewish settlements of the Gaza Strip in 2005, Joyce Dalsheim's *Unsettling Gaza* explores the shifting physical and mental frontiers of the occupied territories at a pivotal moment in Israeli history. Academics and activists will surely be profoundly unsettled—even disturbed—by her courageous and refreshing refusal to caricature and demonize settlers and her seeking to understand more deeply their religio-political ethos. With her ethnography of the last days of Gaza, Dalsheim successfully shakes the intellectual and moral foundations of our scholarly understanding of the settler enterprise to its core.

Dalsheim introduces her work as “a story about settlement in Israel, about antagonism, between Israelis, and the story of discomfort arising through that antagonism” (vii). She identifies the assassination of the Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin at the hands of a fellow Jewish-Israeli associated with the settler camp as the origins of a paradigm shift in the Israeli consciousness—one that repositioned the contours of religio-political violence from the frame of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to that of a Jewish-Israeli issue. While the roots of this intercommunal schism are deeper, this event catalyzed a new “othering” within the Israeli polity and a decade-long, growing divide within Israeli society that culminated in the Gaza disengagement.

Dalsheim aims to destabilize—or unsettle—the binaries between settler affiliates and the Israeli Left through a series of essays that treat various aspects of this dilemma, including encounters in historical narratives about the past and the Palestinians, the “disciplining” of discourse between mainstream settlers and the “Settler Left,” and the dual dislocation of settlers who are Mizrahi (Jews from Arab or Muslim lands), among other topics. These chapters provide an extensive and complex view of settler ideology, religious and spiritual life, and personal choices, with a consistent effort to challenge the reductionist view of what scholarship has traditionally categorized (in the words of Susan Harding) as a “repugnant other.” The only criticism I have is that some sections were so interesting that they could and should be treated at book length. When taken as a whole, the work makes the broader comment that while it may be in the self-interest of both groups (especially of the Israeli Left) to distinguish their values and mores from one another, there is actually a deep convergence between the two sides. In fact, Dalsheim argues that the antagonism of liberals toward post-1967 settlers is merely an attempt to obscure the fact that a settler-colonial framework applies both within and outside the Green Line.

Dalsheim is quite conversant in theory and clearly undertook comprehensive ethnographic work, yet I often felt the book—perhaps at her editor's request—was too much in dialogue with postcolonial and postmodernist scholars and not enough with the settlers themselves. Her interviewing methodology could also have been ex-

panded upon. However, the main flaw of Dalsheim's powerful work is that in breaking down some binaries, she perhaps unintentionally creates new essentialized categories. Her account pits what she terms "religiously motivated right wing settlers" (45; whom she occasionally interchangeably terms Jewish "fundamentalists" or "extremists") against a secular liberal Left. This tracks closely with the historiography, as her work is notably influenced by (and perhaps derivative of) Michael Feige's study of the Israeli peace movement and the primary Israeli settler group, Gush Emunim. However, while the literature recognizes these broader groups, her lack of rigor in addressing definitions and motivations presents several problems for the reader.

First, it conflates religious observance with fundamentalism—a term that has recently been utilized as a catchall phrase to denote a wide range of religious behaviors but that in its strictest sense does not appropriately describe the settler movement. She perhaps utilizes this phraseology because of a shallow reading of settler ideology restricted mainly to Kookist philosophy and her assertion that she uses "Gush Emunim as a shorthand" (27).

Second, it does not sufficiently elucidate the meaning of "right-wing" or "extremist," providing only vague attitudes about what constitutes the behaviors so characterized. This is especially problematic when the words "right-wing" and "religious" are equated, which fails to recognize the significant minority of settlers—especially those among the population group she studies in Gush Katif—who were not religious. As a whole, the terminology of ultranationalism might have provided Dalsheim with more descriptive precision and flexibility in addressing her diverse subjects. Comparable problems exist in her description of the oppositional group. While she makes great effort to complicate the meaning of "secularism," I find that, in the end, she uses it to indicate the opposite of "religious." Moreover, while she asserts the centrality of humanist and liberal values, she neither truly defines what liberalism is nor explains why it applies to this group. Most troublingly, she often equates "secular" with "liberal" in the Israeli context, ignoring the contribution of the so-called Shmol Ha-Dati (religious Left), which forms an integral part of the coalition against the occupation and Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Dati (the religious kibbutz) that helped shape the origins of the larger movement.

Third, and last but not least, the author's use of "antagonism" and "empathy" is unclear. A more rigorous definition of these two ideas, the core principles that underlie the relationship between these two groups, may have allowed for a greater appreciation of the differences and similarities between them.

While it might be easy to dismiss these concerns as definitional quibbling at the margins, they undermine Dalsheim's critical observation that these two outlooks may be fundamentally incompatible. In her book's final chapter, she raises the cogent point that the Israeli settler case has the potential to complicate the broader scholarship on liberalism in the Middle East, especially as a counterpoint to work on Islamism. From a larger perspective, her work could help overcome political obstacles to the integration of Israel into the larger literature on the Middle East.

Finally, Dalsheim offers one of few contemporary accounts that leave the reader with the dimmest glimmer of hope about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While she persuasively argues for a clash of worldviews, we are left with the aspiration that shared interests may provide common ground, regardless of territorial expansion or contraction in the future.

SARA Yael HIRSCHHORN, *Brandeis University*.

WINKLER, LEWIS E. *Contemporary Muslim and Christian Responses to Religious Plurality: Wolfhart Pannenberg in Dialogue with Abdulaziz Sachedina*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011. 350 pp. \$39.00 (paper).

With Wolfhart Pannenberg and Abdulaziz Sachedina as his primary interlocutors, the evangelical scholar Lewis E. Winkler proposes that civil and sincere interreligious dialogue need not compromise the veracity of religious conviction. Productive interreligious dialogue recognizes and wrestles with instances of disagreement and tension rather than dismissing them as trivial. Within both Christianity and Islam we might find imperatives to respect, listen to, and learn from the other. Winkler's text is a welcome contribution to a growing literature on pluralism at the same time that it develops ideas still relatively unexplored in Sachedina's work and particularly in Pannenberg's.

Winkler concedes the difficulty of taxonomizing Christian and Muslim theologies of religion. There are those who categorically reject any position other their own (exclusivists) and others who are more indulgent (inclusivists or pluralists). Rationales for either exclusivism or inclusivism vary. Winkler documents the diversity of Christian opinions of the religious Other in terms of a series of centrist typologies, but he never quite escapes the binary of insider and outsider. The various centrism represent only different criteria by which one's relative proximity to the most adequate religious community might be adjudicated. When he turns to Muslim theologies of religions, he "reluctantly" acknowledges the persistence of exclusivism and inclusivism and finally concludes that there is only exclusivism: "Ultimately all attempts to be truly pluralistic collapse into some sort of inclusivism. And inclusivisms tend to collapse into exclusivistic claims for themselves since they all, in one way or another, argue that they are the 'best' and 'truest' way to approach religious plurality" (40; see also 173).

This is not a problem for Winkler but, rather, a crucial acknowledgment: "It is important to seek points of agreement among world religions, but deliberately avoiding conflict and attempting to smooth over or even deny real differences only produces a religious amalgamation that no longer represents any of the world's religions as they are actually understood and practiced by the vast majority of their adherents" (63). Pannenberg and Sachedina prove compelling representatives of their respective traditions because each maintains the uniqueness and truth of his own tradition while at the same time acknowledging the religious Other's competing claims to account for God, history, and the human condition. For reasons internal to their own traditions and supported by their respective sacred texts—for Pannenberg, God's revelatory activity in all of history and humanity's universal religiosity; for Sachedina, humanity's primordial capacity to know truth (*fitra*) and the priority of forgiveness—they both propose that theology must recognize wisdom expressed in other religious communities. Critical to both thinkers' commendation of interreligious dialogue is the acknowledgment of divine revelation as historically conditioned such that the formulation of dogma is always provisional, developing alongside the rest of human knowledge.

Winkler concedes that not all religion is concerned primarily with truth (122), but Winkler's own theology certainly is. He writes, "As a Christian, I am unashamed to affirm the truth and moral life of Jesus far exceeds similar claims made by all other religious leaders and systems. Otherwise, I would not remain a Christian" (229). One can imagine that this might not be the case for all Christians. There is not enough in this text about the virtue of otherness itself, which entails the reminder of the provisionality or contestability of one's own positions. I find myself wishing for a text in which Christians are enjoined to celebrate and truly learn from non-Christians so that their own traditions, both theology and practice, might be enriched.

Regrettably, in Winkler's argument the commendable recognition of the religious Other gives way to competitiveness. Interreligious dialogue, for Winkler, is fundamentally polemical, and in the second half of the text, the reader begins to wonder what function Sachedina plays in the argument. His work does not explicitly influence Winkler's own theology except inasmuch as it recommends the possibility of amenable religious interlocutors within Islam. Perhaps this is no little accomplishment, but one might expect, especially in light of Winkler's particular position (according to which instances of tension and disagreement are the most productive points for interreligious engagement), that Islam might offer some unique insight not native to Christianity. Each of the resources identified by Winkler in Sachedina's theology of religions (196–201) might also have been identified in politically conservative evangelical Christian thought.

Winkler proposes that Christians may benefit from Islamic conviction of God's absolute unity, a corrective to the mistake of tritheism, but this comment is exceedingly brief (285–86). Within sentences, Winkler begins to detail how it is that the Trinity accounts for historical actualities, such as the resurrection, that Islam is ill-equipped to address: "If God really is triune, I would suggest other religious conceptions of God are, to some extent, inherently impoverished, since they deny, ignore, and/or miss(interpret) God's ongoing triune work in time" (286); "I do not think Islam has thought deeply enough about this problem of the many and the one" (290); "Without a deeper and more developed concept of immanent relationality between God and humanity, Islam cannot provide a satisfactory explanation for the unquenchable longing for an experiential encounter with the living God" (292); "Christians need to continue to share persuasively the biblically reliable depiction of the particularities of the historical life and message of Jesus with Muslims and others without apology or shame" (308).

Ultimately a somewhat tentative evangelical Christian theology of God as it informs practical exigencies of religious pluralism, Winkler's text never convincingly invites Islam to challenge any particular features of Christian theology. His rhetoric will make some readers justifiably uncomfortable and threatens the mutuality of the Christian-Muslim encounter. That which Winkler leaves the Muslim interlocutor to contribute feels a bit insignificant.

Nevertheless, this is an engaging and quite comprehensive account of practical concerns that mitigate against an uncritical embrace of any and all religious positions balanced by the exigencies of living in religiously plural contexts. Winkler is convincing in arguing that pluralism compels debate and, ultimately, decisions. As he advises, we would do well to identify the religious imperatives to engage in dialogue and debate as we simultaneously defend religious freedom.

CABELL KING, *Chicago, Illinois*.

CHAVES, MARK. *American Religion: Contemporary Trends*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011. 160 pp. \$22.95 (cloth).

At the heart of Mark Chaves's *American Religion* lies a simple assertion. Mostly using survey data from 1972 to 2008, he finds that rather than dramatic changes in the religious landscape in the United States, "no indicator of traditional belief or practice is going up" (110). There is, perhaps, a "softening" of religion—there are more people who say "none" when asked of their religion; people don't appreciate the clergy as much as they used to, and fewer students in the traditional college-bound intellectual elite desire a religious career. People also seem to belong to more diverse congregations, and to be more open to the possibility that there are multiple roads to

salvation—that their religion does not hold a monopoly over the divine. But these are relatively minor changes; overall, the religious world that Americans encounter today is strikingly similar to the one they encountered in 1972.

Chaves's use of statistics in the book is masterful. Without sacrificing the complexity of his arguments, he succeeds in moving along a convincing analytic narrative using measures that can be easily understood by people who do not spend their days looking at regression analyses. Through such use of survey data, the book covers, in short and well-written chapters, a wide variety of trends. Although the author focuses mostly on Christianity, which is necessarily the case for general surveys that capture few Jews, Muslims, and others, Chaves covers much ground—from measures of belief to measures of participation, from changes in leadership to the alleged decline of liberal Protestantism.

The book has two layers. For undergraduates and the general reader it provides the useful function of debunking a good few myths. Tempering both the arguments of simplistic secularization scholars and those of scholars who claim a religious revival, *American Religion* shows a much more mundane picture. In that capacity, Chaves's book fulfills an important role, if only the public it is intended for will actually read it.

But although it provides grounds for discussion by presenting some general survey trends, the book does not provide straightforward answers. It is in trying to unravel the social processes underlying some of Chaves's findings (in terms of both stability and change) that, I believe, a second—and, to my mind, more interesting—layer of the book can be gleaned. For scholars of religion the book thus performs a different function. In this capacity, *American Religion* provides a set of puzzles. Given that certain things probably *have* changed since the 1970s, how do we account for the stability in reported belief and practices? How do we make sense of the changes Chaves does find?

Take, for example, the data on university graduates not wanting to become members of the clergy (69–72). Should these findings be interpreted to mean that careers in the clergy have indeed become less coveted by the intellectual elite? Or, alternatively, are new institutions taking the place of the old clergy-producing institutions, catering to an alternative intellectual elite that does not go through the same career trajectories? What, for example, should be made of the category of people that sociologists of religion call “nones”—those who answer “none” when asked to indicate their religious affiliation but who often provide seemingly religious answers when asked about life after death, the existence of God, and so forth? The percentage of “nones” has risen dramatically since the 1970s. But what does that mean? Here, Chaves goes beyond the statistical and speculates, with other sociologists, that the answer “none” does not always denote loss of faith but, rather, a change in what the category “Christian” means, so that “Christian” now connotes, for a growing slice of the population, a right-wing Evangelicalism from which they want to distance themselves. What people say in response to survey questions is thus important not because it provides a mirror of social life but because it provides clues to social processes that survey responses hint about but do not simply depict.

The only pitfall this useful and interesting book sometimes falls into appears when Chaves seems to forget the limitations of his data—when he seems to be seduced by his statistics. Thus, for example, in his discussion of the growing polarization in the American religious scene (94–109), Chaves shows that the most religiously active individuals today are increasingly those who belong to conservative congregations and that the distance between the political and theological attitudes of the more religiously active and of the less active is growing. This is interesting and useful, but Chaves then argues that because other differences (such as class or gender) are more salient and because different congregations have actually moved in the same direc-

tion (e.g., toward greater acceptance of same-sex marriage), “the increasing attitudinal distance between the most and the least religiously active people in the U.S. society does not amount to culture war” (109). But is this so? Can such measures tell us whether a “culture war” is brewing? How people perceive and experience their differences may have less to do with objective trends than with subjective impressions, how they construct boundaries between themselves and “others”—boundaries that may have little to do with the trends Chaves finds.

These slippages, however, are rare. More than most quantitatively based narratives, Chaves’s work is careful to relate the narratives emerging from trends in survey responses to the ways people construct meaning in their everyday lives, rather than reducing one to the other. What people say in response to a survey does not simply reflect what they do or how they experience their world. But neither can it be ignored. *American Religion* thus provides a generative research program for scholars of religion, a plethora of possible questions and puzzles. As such, it serves as an important provocation for research as well as an eminently readable introduction to the religious landscape in the United States over the past decades.

IDDO TAVORY, *New School for Social Research*.

BREKKE, TORDEL. *Fundamentalism: Prophecy and Protest in an Age of Globalization*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 2012. xii+291 pp. \$29.99 (paper).

Had Torkel Brekke, a professor from Oslo, chosen to write about fundamentalism having “gone global,” he would have performed a worthy service to readers in Europe and North America should they still see fundamentalism as born and bred in the United States and still sequestered there. He knows and shows and wants readers to know that fundamentalism takes form on all continents and that it must be understood by people in statecraft, military affairs, universities, and, oh yes, religious circles. But Brekke has ambitions beyond talking about the geographical spread of the fundamentalist movement(s) around the globe. The subtitle and a number of chapter heads of his new book reveal that his concern is not for the global per se but, rather, for globalization, a category that demands separate styles of inquiry.

The author, a specialist in South Asian studies, is well poised to keep his eye on religious phenomena around the globe, but he also focuses on what globalization specifically means for religion. Like most experts who write on this subject, he is aware that some scholars disdain the use of the category “fundamentalism.” In their eyes, the word should remain quarantined within Christian confines and, in any case, is so regularly used pejoratively that it clouds the discourse. Rather convincingly, he dismisses such dismissals and moves on to show awareness as well of the informative nuances that are to be associated with globalized fundamentalism. Along the way, he offers a definition of fundamentalism, discusses problems associated with the category “religious,” and warns against false homogenizations of complex movements such as the fundamentalist one.

Most of his definitional work, and the relative originality of what he has to offer, centers on “globalization” and what it is and does. The suffix “-ization” has its own character, as it forces a reframing of inquiries. In Brekke’s view, one must approach globalization through study of the episode called “secularization,” with its attending “-ation” terms such as “industrialization,” “privatization,” “differentiation,” and—skip the suffix now—“decline in religious authority.” When these hit a religiously shaped culture, religion is threatened, and the religious react. They must react, to survive and prosper, however much the reaction does to change the original religious culture.

All this means, therefore, that far from fundamentalism being perceived and cast as “religious conservatism”—“the old-time religion”—it is, by most definitions of the term, distinctively modern. Those who adhere to the old-time religion as such will not fulfill the terms of fundamentalist commitment, which, as Brekke sees it, calls all adherents to react, something that more passive and huddled-together conservatives do not. Reaction—which perhaps we should stress as “re + action”—is the key to fundamentalist phenomena whether these relate to Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, or any other religious complex. Reactors alter the agenda of their otherwise fading religious commitments. Fundamentalists amass not so much the original already-invented lines of defense as they invent new ones. Apparent paradoxes result. If they once deplored earthly and worldly political life, they later do an about-face and grasp whatever in politics is useful for their vision. If in their moderate or conservative cultural phases or stages they were suspicious of and even demonized the instruments that advance modernity, most particularly the mass media of communication, they soon learn to influence and even dominate these media, offering useful new-time religion to challenge and replace old-time religion along with the milder and moderate alterations that carried believers only partway but in the end left them defenseless.

This review will have done an injustice to the book’s author if it creates the impression that all his book does is apply concepts from the sociologist Talcott Parsons, the great theorist of differentiation-as-modernization, Max Weber on the economies, and Charles Darwin on evolution, although Brekke applies them well. Most of his book is given over to the applications in several religious cultures. Brekke’s book is too brief for him to elaborate sufficiently on his case studies—but he does show that he is at home with the sources and does not apply the terms of fundamentalism studies casually. The chosen cases are sufficiently different from one another that his treatments of them can be tested and, to my taste, found to be revealing.

Naturally, he has to begin with the American Protestant story, both for its historic importance and for the way it provides background for comparisons. But then he moves to succinct and sophisticated discussions of Hinduism and Dharmarajya, the “Buddhist state”; Islamic law and Buddhist law under fundamentalist control and tutelage; and more. He even circles back to the United States to expose the grounds for fundamentalist battles over education at all levels. He skips discussion of Jewish fundamentalism, but it would have “worked” as another model of modernity, differentiation, and reaction.

What provides openings for fundamentalist reactions is the decline of inherited forms of religious authority: “Fundamentalism as a global phenomenon is more about religious authority and styles of religious leadership than the specific doctrines that fundamentalists attack or defend. In fact, fundamentalism as a global phenomenon is at least as much about form as about content” (25). The author applies that assumption in chapter 9, “The Struggle over Women,” whether dealing with Christian or Hindu (e.g., in the subchapter “*Sita* or *Durga*?”) struggles, those of Egyptian Muslims, or Purdah in Pakistan. His subchapter “Women between Fundamentalism and Modernism” is a brief but provocative evocation of the personal dilemmas faced by people caught between the challenged order and the new scene.

His conclusion has room for only a few observations and envisionings. Most convincing and obvious is the understanding that secularization may be contradictory but that “differentiation is hard to reverse” (269). The implied advice “globally” is that the forces that provoke fundamentalist reaction globally will outlive the various improvised fundamentalisms, which are enormously powerful, as they have their day and that they must be understood by devotees, opponents, and bystanders alike.

MARTIN E. MARTY, *University of Chicago*.

MCDANIEL, JUSTIN THOMAS. *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. 327 pp. \$60.00 (cloth).

Thailand is commonly understood as a “Theravada Buddhist” country—indeed, the most populous one in the world today. Such a description suggests conformity to a standardized set of beliefs and religious practices, which are anchored, in turn, to a commonly recognized set of canonical texts. The task of understanding Theravada Buddhism in Thailand, therefore, ought to be based, first, on an understanding of these scriptures. Religious beliefs and practices can then be judged from the standpoint of how closely they conform to the canonical scriptures. This approach has led scholars of Buddhism in Thailand to concern themselves with questions relating to canonicity, the origins of various religious traditions (the older the tradition, the more authentic), the identification and assigning of religious ideas and practices to separate categories of “Theravada Buddhism,” “Mahayana Buddhism,” “Hinduism,” “animism,” and so forth. The reception of religious traditions is described in terms of “localization,” “hybridization,” or “syncretism.” Generally speaking, this has been the framework in which much of the existing Western study of Buddhism in Thailand has been carried out. It is this framework that Justin Thomas McDaniel seeks to overturn in his highly provocative book *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand*.

In the world of Thai Buddhism that McDaniel describes, the canonical scriptures are only one element of a complex, heterogeneous, ever-changing religious cacophony of vengeful ghosts, charismatic monks, protective amulets, incantations conveying supernatural powers, personal child ghost servants, magical corpse oil, tree spirits, *yantras*, continually changing rituals and liturgies, and a pantheon of gods, Buddhas, bodhisattvas, deities, and ancestral spirits. McDaniel even questions whether it makes any sense to use the term “Theravada Buddhism” to refer to the contemporary religious scene in Thailand at all. Instead, he uses the concept “religious repertoires” to make sense of a religious sphere that seems to defy systematic description. By “repertoire” is meant “a constantly shifting collection of gestures, objects, texts, plots, tropes, ethical maxims, precepts, ritual movements, and expectations” (225). What’s more, these repertoires differ from person to person, and they may be “internally inconsistent.” For McDaniel, “There is no core of Thai Buddhism” (15). Rather than striving for nirvana or strictly adhering to religious precepts, many Thais experience this religious repertoire as directed toward achieving “security, heritage, graciousness, and abundance” (15). As McDaniel himself admits, his scholarly training in Indic philology and history had blinded him to what Thai Buddhism means for many, if not most, Thai Buddhists. His book is an attempt to redress this problem.

McDaniel pursues his argument by hinging the book on a detailed study of a subject that has been almost totally overlooked by scholars of Thai Buddhism: Thailand’s most famous ghost story, the tale of Mae Nak and the charismatic monk, Somdet To, who was able to exorcise that ghost. The story, which originally dates from the mid-nineteenth century, has been retold in countless different forms—radio plays, TV programs, and movies, including *Nang Nak*, the international hit movie of 1999, directed by Nonzee Nimibut.

The book is divided into four parts: “Monks and Kings”; “Texts and Magic”; “Rituals and Liturgies”; and “Art and Objects.” The result is not only a convincing argument about the limitations of existing studies of Thai Buddhism but also an extremely rich empirical study of contemporary religious practice in Thailand. The reader will find detailed discussions of aspects of Thai religion that are to be found nowhere else in the English-language literature. For example, McDaniel gives the

most complete description of the story of the famous female ghost, Mae Nak, and the extraordinary cult that surrounds her. He provides the fullest account yet of the life of the charismatic nineteenth-century monk Somdet To and the plethora of legends, rituals, practices, texts, and religious objects that have grown up around his memory. According to McDaniel, Somdet To is “central to the history of Buddhism in Thailand” (26) and is the exemplary figure for contemporary Buddhists. Somdet To is also the most popular figure in Thailand’s huge market in Buddhist amulets. This gives McDaniel the opportunity to discuss the thriving amulet trade, which has often been dismissed on the grounds of its supposed “commercialization” of Buddhism or because of its association with “materialism,” as opposed to the supposed otherworldly emphasis of “real” Buddhism. As McDaniel points out, anyone who wants to understand Buddhism in Thailand today—or, indeed, historically—cannot ignore the importance of material objects. McDaniel also analyzes what he regards as Thailand’s most widely recognized religious text, the Pali *Chinabanchorn katha*. This was the text used by Somdet To to exorcise the ghost of Mae Nak. Today the text is known by heart by almost all monks and nuns, as well as by many lay Buddhists. There are even “chanting clubs” dedicated to memorizing and chanting the text. The fifteen-verse text is neither canonical nor foreign but apparently of Thai origin. And rather than encapsulating Buddhist concepts of nonattachment or overcoming suffering, the text is an incantation designed to provide protection from danger. Indeed, in contrast to Buddhism’s peaceful image, the verses of the *Chinabanchorn katha* have a martial quality to them.

Another intriguing argument McDaniel develops is that, due to Thailand’s capitalist expansion and globalizing economy (it is the most successful of the Theravada countries), there has been a gradual “recentering” of Theravada Buddhism, away from its origins in Sri Lanka and India or even Burma, and toward Thailand. From there, Thai Buddhism is reexported to South Asia and Southeast Asia. This accounts both for the relative lack of concern in Thailand to conform to an “authentic” Buddhism from outside and for the abundance of new “Thai” Buddhist practices.

McDaniel brings many strengths to the book. He reads Pali, Thai, and French and has spent years in the monkhood in Thailand. He is part textual scholar, part historian, part anthropologist, and part scholar of popular culture. He is also a skilled writer; the book is a pleasure to read. This is an important book—certainly the most important to come out of studies of Thai Buddhism for many years. It will likely have an impact well outside this field.

PATRICK JORY, *University of Queensland*.

KRIPAL, JEFFREY J. *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. 370 pp. \$29.00 (cloth).

Some years ago, in the course of fieldwork research, I found myself in a Mumbai slum discussing *Conan the Barbarian* (1982). My interlocutor had caught a screening somewhere in town of the Arnold Schwarzenegger movie. His translation of the title into Hindu terms as *Konarak*, after the famous temple complex in Orissa, foreshadowed his final statement on the spectacle. It had evidently made a strong impression: “Do you know what that film is really about?” he pressed me. “It’s about God.”

Conan is one of the many muscular luminaries of twentieth-century American geek culture to make an appearance in Jeffrey J. Kripal’s new book, *Mutants and Mystics*, a playful, provocative, and eccentric excavation of mystical tropes and themes in comic books and allied genres. Wonder-workers from the skies; humble subjects marked for epic destinies; dueling master plans of light and dark—connections be-

tween religion and the imagery and symbolism of superhero comics have not gone unremarked in religious studies, as recent conference panels and publications such as the volume edited by A. David Lewis and Christine Hoff Kraemer, *Graven Images: Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels* (New York, 2010), can attest. *Mutants and Mystics* is a substantial contribution to the conversation, and a handsome one—the designer at the University of Chicago Press has called attention to the book through eye-catching typography and illustrations work, of which more below. But even given the catholicity of approaches the subject matter attracts—theology, psychology, art history, film and media analysis, and cultural studies all get seats around this table—Kripal's inquiry stands out as distinctive.

Readers are cautioned against the expectation that a study of this important stratum in modern cultural production would necessarily be attentive to questions of gender, race, or power. Neither the social dimensions of identity nor religion in its ideological aspect are concerns of this book. Nor—and this lacuna seems all the more conspicuous given the lurid action pictorials of Batman, the X-Men, Dr. Manhattan, and the like that complement the text—is the representation of the violence so central to these visual and narrative forms afforded critical scrutiny. In fact, it's downright surprising how little room Kripal's exposition finds for any discussion of the compositional details of the images (among them the work of such celebrated hands as Jack Kirby and Frank Frazetta) that he and the production staff have so lovingly collated and reproduced. Notwithstanding his introductory statement that "I have transmitted my ideas here through one left-brain-dominant mode (writing) and one right-brain-dominant mode (graphic art) . . . in the same two-brained spirit, I have 'explained' the illustrations in the body of the text" (ix), the author, with hardly a word to spare for visual analysis, has largely left the pictures, at a formal level, to speak for themselves.

What does interest Kripal as a scholar of religion is experience—specifically, mystical experience. William James is named at several points in this book—we learn that "there would be no X-Men mythology without [his] ideas" (189)—but his legacy extends well beyond those few pages. In quest of accounts in which altered perceptions of personal identity, agency, and spatiotemporal location find expression in pop-cultural idioms, Kripal mines a rich vein through US (and selected UK) comic books and associated science fiction writing of the most whiz-bang sort. But the real heart of his inquiry is the discourse of the paranormal, as developed through a century's span of technically (if problematically) nonfiction texts. In fact, the domination of this book's visual register by the prizes of the author's comics collection obscures the centrality to his exposition of the literature of the New Age—a corpus whose graphic component is not as attractive but whose words provide Kripal with some of his most arresting images.

Mutants and Mystics is the kind of book-length study in which the coherence of the organizational scheme adds up to an argument. Kripal's scheme is to trace a genealogy of conceptions and tropes of mystical experience—what he calls the "Super-Story"—from the late-nineteenth-century esotericism retailed by groups like the Rosicrucians and Theosophists, through to the contemporary works of comics visionaries Alan Moore and Grant Morrison and alien-encounter specialist Whitley Strieber. The trip proceeds along a succession of seven "mythemes": divinization/demonization; orientation (in which the source of wisdom is sequestered in the mystic East); alienation (gnosis relocates to distant planets); radiation (a postwar development); mutation (see *X-Men* [2000, 2003, 2006]); and, finally, the reflexive stages of realization and authorization (in which all the discussion of awareness becomes leavened by some degree of postmodern self-awareness). It's a wild ride. Wherever he pauses for breath, Kripal's own authorizing move is to read his comic

book and science fiction sources against the biographies and personal statements of a select number of artists and writers who have cultivated paranormal experiences. In privileging the creators' own testimony as an anchor for the symbols and idioms disseminated through genre literature (which is how, in turn, the message reaches the rest of us), he elevates these virtuosos to the status of pop-culture auteurs.

While the reflexive turn delineated in his last chapters would seem to invite a try at reversing these causal polarities, Kripal does not follow through in a sustained way. The cue should, however, be apparent to historians and anthropologists of religion who study possession experiences: to problematize artistic inspiration in terms of a displacement of genius outside the bounds of the subject is to direct attention at the cultural contingency of that subject position. No more *sui generis* than their heroes, the creative "agents" of Kripal's account are themselves embedded within twentieth-century American culture—within ideology, even.

So what would it mean for us to take a hard look at white, male, and nerdy as a subject position? One way to begin might be to ask what it says about our auteurs' interpretive horizons that their visions of realms beyond rational ken should tend to take shape encoded in the familiar way they do—agonistic narrative, science jargon, big muscles, big engines, explosions . . .

WILLIAM ELISON, *Dartmouth College*.

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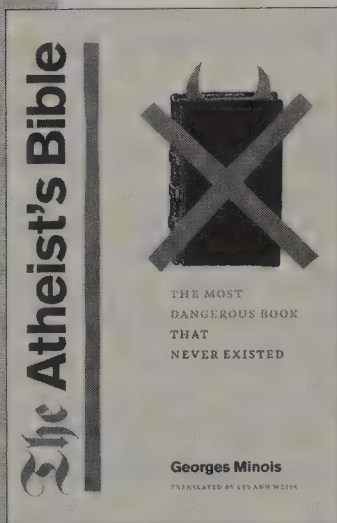
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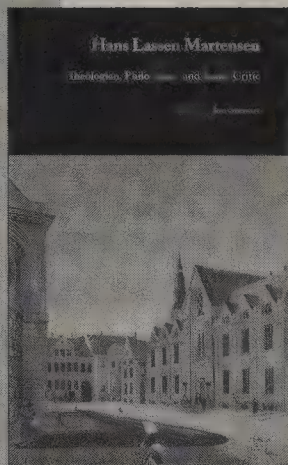
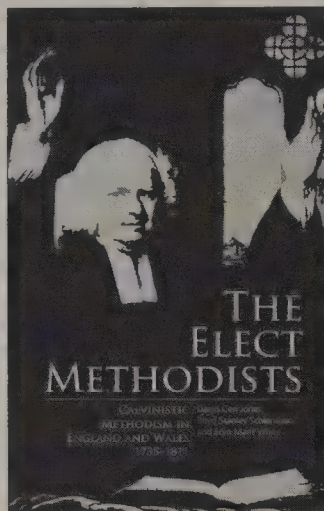
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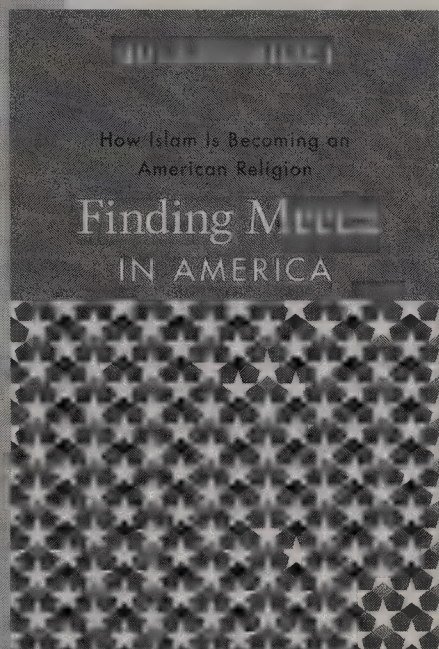


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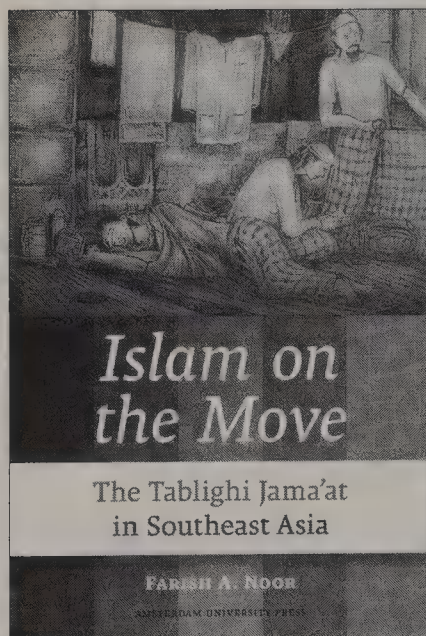
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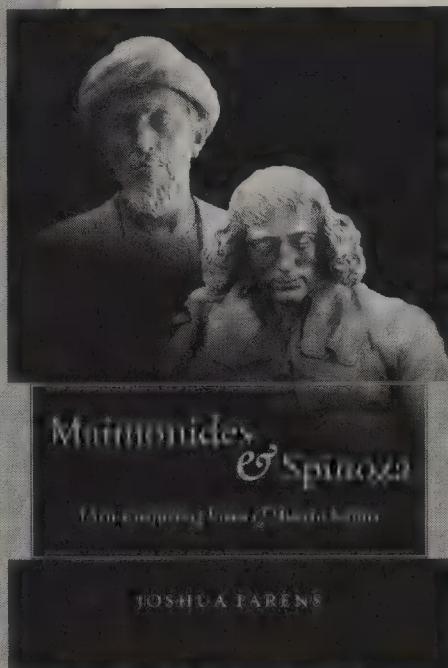
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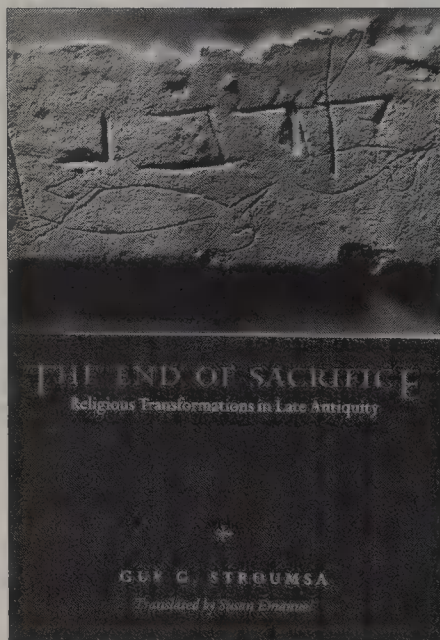
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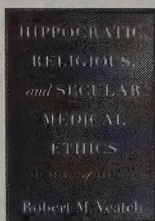
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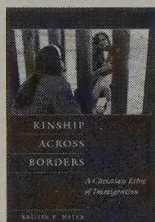
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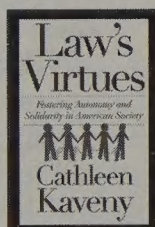
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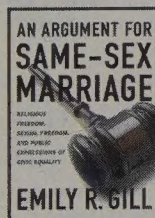
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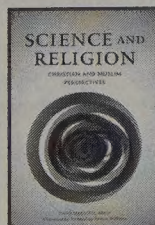
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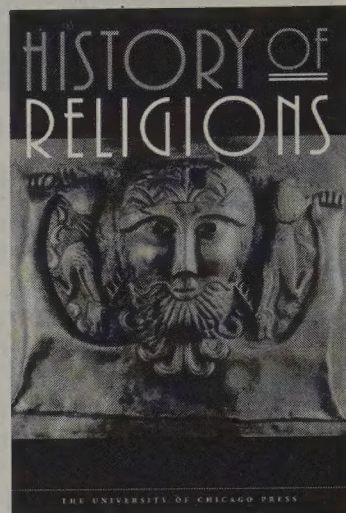
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